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Examining Ambition:

An Interpretation of Plato's *Alcibiades*

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Examining Ambition:

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The relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades was infamous in antiquity. Alcibiades' notorious betrayal of the Athenians during the Peloponnesian war helped to bring about Athens' downfall, and the charges of corrupting the young and impiety for which Socrates was ultimately executed point unambiguously to the misdeeds of his most renowned and treasonous pupil. In Plato's *Alcibiades*, Socrates approaches Alcibiades for the first time, claiming to have the power to bring the youth's grandest and most tyrannical political hopes to a culmination. What does the ensuing conversation tell us about the nature of Alcibiades' ambition and about Socrates' intentions in associating with him? In this essay, careful attention is paid to the structure and unity of this underappreciated dialogue in order to uncover Plato's teaching about the roots of political ambition and the approach of Socratic philosophy. The resulting analysis reveals that Socrates is interested in recruiting politically ambitious students because of how powerfully youthful political ambition seeks the good by means of just, noble, and honorable activity, and that Socrates' hope is to awaken Alcibiades to the ambiguous and unquestioned character of his belief that the greatest human good can be obtained in the world of politics. Having recognized this as central to the Socratic project, we can consider how and to what extent political ambition relies on some misapprehension about the relationship of the good and the *advantageous* to the just and the noble.

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Introduction

There are a number of reasons for which one might turn to a study of the *Alcibiades*. A famous commentator writing some eight centuries after Plato said that, "this dialogue is the beginning of all philosophy," and that the whole development of Plato's philosophy was anticipated in the *Alcibiades* "as in a seed." In the same commentary, he also claimed that, "every human being is more or less clearly subject to the very experiences to which the son of Kleinias too was subject."[1] All of this may be so; we must ultimately decide for ourselves whether or not these judgments are supported by a careful study of the work. But the *Alcibiades* does not first come to sight as a treatment of "the nature of man," and so we must not approach it as such. Rather, the *Alcibiades* presents itself as describing the conversation that began an infamous association: that of Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, whom the Athenians tried and executed for impiety and corruption of the youth, and Alcibiades, one of history's most brilliant political and military leaders, whose alleged acts of sacrilege and subsequent defection set in motion the course of events that culminated in the fall of the Athenian empire. We therefore come to the *Alcibiades* in the expectation that Plato will acquit his teacher of the crime with which Athens more or less explicitly charged him, either by providing an account of Alcibiades' nature, or by revealing Socrates' intention in associating with him, or both.

We are apparently invited, then, to bring two questions to our examination of the *Alcibiades*. First, what is so exceptional in this Alcibiades, and what is the character of

[1] Proclus, *Alcibiades I* 6-7, 11.

his ambition? And second, why is he of such great interest to Socrates? These questions are addressed and at least partially answered in this dialogue – but, as with all Platonic dialogues, a first or cursory reading is likely to leave the reader more perplexed than satisfied by the conversation's many strange and incomplete arguments. The action of the dialogue, the rise and fall of its key themes and questions, the ebb and flow of the interlocutors' intentions and emotions, all stand out in much starker relief once we perceive the *structure* of the dialogue, the way in which its various parts fit together with all of their peaks and pivots.

The *Alcibiades* can be divided into three parallel parts (103a1-113d8, 113d9-119c1 and 119c2-135e8), each containing roughly the same sequence of three subsections: 1) Speeches, 2) Refutations, 3) Exhortations. Each subsection of each part can help us to deepen our understanding both of Alcibiades' ambition and of Socrates' intention. The speeches indicate features of Alcibiades' character that Socrates wishes to draw out or to suppress, and suggest some reasons why Socrates may wish to do so; the refutations bring out confusions in Alcibiades' understanding of the political things, and reveal the potential course of Socrates' education of him; the exhortations contain good and bad pictures of what Alcibiades might become, and quietly but clearly elaborate crucial features of the philosophic project Socrates intends to carry out. Let us therefore take up each of the dialogue's nine sections in turn with an eye to better understanding the relationship between Alcibiades and Socrates.

Part One

I. Speeches (103a1-106a1)

The *Alcibiades* begins with two Socratic speeches separated by a brief exchange. These speeches help us to place the dialogue on the timelines of Socrates' and Alcibiades' lives and provide some important information about their relationship hitherto. In this way, the speeches serve as useful introduction to the reader. That is their least important purpose. The speeches are of far greater interest in the context of the drama of the dialogue itself. It is by way of these speeches that Socrates introduces himself to Alcibiades, seizes his attention, and primes him for the examination that is to follow. They are masterpieces of Socratic rhetoric. We must therefore begin by considering the effects these speeches are meant to have on Alcibiades and the reasons for which Socrates wants to achieve those effects.

The beginning of the dialogue makes clear that Alcibiades was a youth of extraordinary, perhaps unmatched, beauty and charm. We learn immediately that he has been pursued for years by a "crowd" of lovers, who only recently seem to have given up the pursuit. Socrates presents himself as one such lover, and yet emphasizes his strangeness by distinguishing himself from all the others in a number of ways. He was the first to become a lover of Alcibiades, and he is the only one who remains now that the others have given up – and yet, in all the years Socrates has been doggedly following Alcibiades, he has never spoken to him before now (103a1-4). All of this suggests that Socrates' attraction to Alcibiades is fundamentally different from that of a typical lover. While the others were drawn to him, and attempted to seduce him, during a particular

phase of his physical development, Socrates has apparently been keen to observe Alcibiades' progress from childhood to early adulthood. In short, his interest is in Alcibiades' soul and not merely in his body (cf. 131c11-e5).

While that may explain the longevity of Socrates' interest, however, it does not explain his long silence. Socrates explains: "The cause of this has been no human thing, but a certain *daimonic* opposition whose power you will learn of later. But now, since it no longer opposes, I have come forward in this way, and I am hopeful that it will not oppose in the future" (103a4-b2). Of course, this explanation does nothing to make Socrates appear less strange to Alcibiades. Rather, it gives to Socrates' strangeness a mysterious, uncanny aura. He claims to have access to a divine *power*, and suggests that he may be able to demonstrate this power to Alcibiades. From the very beginning, then, Socrates' privileged relationship with a divine being is an essential feature of his self-presentation. Equally important, however, is his claim of pious obedience to this divinity. Socrates' association with Alcibiades has been made possible only by the retraction of the divine prohibition, which may return, for all we know, at any time.

The importance of Socrates' appearing uniquely strange and intriguing to Alcibiades is brought out by what comes next. Alcibiades has rebuffed the advances of each of his many lovers, Socrates explains, by exceeding them in pride (*phronēma*). Alcibiades' pride is expressed in his claim to be in need of nothing from anyone, "for the things that belong to [him] are great, beginning from the body and ending in the soul, so that [he] need[s] nothing" (104a1-3). This account suggests that a lover must be able to convince his beloved that he has something of value to offer. No one has been able to

win Alcibiades' favor because no one has been able to offer anything worthwhile in exchange. By making this explicit, Socrates is already raising the question of what he could possibly have to offer. He is also raising the even more perplexing question of what it is that he could possibly want in exchange.

The rest of the speech only heightens the implausibility of Socrates' success, as Socrates proceeds to flatter Alcibiades by listing the grounds of his overweening sense of self-sufficiency. Briefly, these are his physical beauty, the distinction of his family and the connections thereby available to him, the greatness of his city, and most of all, "the power [he] supposes belongs to [him] in [his guardian] Pericles … who has the power to do what he wishes, not only in this city, but in all of Greece and among many and great barbarian races" (104a4-b8). With these blessings of fortune, and especially with his access to extraordinary political power, what could Alcibiades ever need from a lover? Alcibiades recognizes, according to Socrates, that he has overcome his lovers by boasting about all of these things and by their being needier than he is (104c2-4). Hence, Socrates concludes his first speech by admitting that Alcibiades must wonder at his persistence – what could Socrates, who must cut a laughable figure next to Alcibiades' "many and proud" lovers – intend and hope for?

Socrates must puncture Alcibiades' sense of self-sufficiency and convince him that he is in need of something important, something Socrates can provide. In showing us this, the first speech has set the stage upon which the whole of the *Alcibiades* will take place. But even in that first speech, there is some indication of what Alcibiades lacks. That he was said to "boast" of his advantages to his lovers means that he was

exaggerating them to some degree. Indeed, the power of which Alcibiades boasts is not yet his own; he depends for it on Pericles and his other relatives. That he has "many excellent friends and relatives who could serve [him] if he should need something" is, to say the least, in some tension with his claim to have "no need of any human being for anything" (104b1-2, 104a1-2). His wealth would seem to be his most palpable source of independent power, and Socrates mentions it only to say that Alcibiades seems to attribute his greatness to wealth least of all (104b8-c1). It is *political* power that Alcibiades covets, and he does not yet truly possess it. Socrates' gambit will rely heavily on that fact.

But there is a more important wrinkle in Socrates' flattery of Alcibiades. Socrates speaks of Alcibiades' great possessions beginning from his body and ending in his soul; but while he admits that Alcibiades' height and beauty are "clear for everyone to see," he never specifies the matching characteristics of soul to which these supposedly point. The praise and attention that Alcibiades has received on account of his beauty have contributed to the high opinion he holds of himself, but that high opinion is surely about more than his looks. Alcibiades believes himself to be an exceptional human being in part because of his exceptional beauty. But what if Socrates could show him that, with respect to his soul, he is in fact a deeply *deficient* human being, and that the apparent promise of his beauty is in danger of going unfulfilled? This would be harder to make clear to Alcibiades than the obstacles that stand between him and political power, but it could also be the basis of a more powerful appeal. At this point, however, we must admit that we cannot judge of the relative usefulness of the two possible appeals we have

identified because we still do not know what Socrates *wants* from Alcibiades. The first speech has done nothing to shed light on that matter.

Alcibiades' response indicates that Socrates' tactic has worked; he is curious to know what Socrates hopes for in always taking care to be around him. He "really wonder[s] what in the world [Socrates'] business is, and would learn it with pleasure" (104d3-5). We might even wonder whether Socrates' introductory speech was unnecessary, since Alcibiades claims already to have been intending to approach Socrates with these very matters in mind. But the speech has allowed Socrates to begin the association at the precise moment and in the precise manner of his choosing, and the combination of his flattery of Alcibiades and his claims to divine revelation were likely necessary for the sake of intensifying Alcibiades' curiosity and interest. For Socrates now goes out of his way to get Alcibiades' assurance that he will remain and listen for however long it takes him to explain his intention. Socrates is concerned that Alcibiades will leave prematurely; he may well be thinking of the painful effect of the Socratic refutations he has in mind to administer. This already suggests, then, that Socrates both hopes to teach Alcibiades something important and difficult, and that he is unsure as to whether Alcibiades will be up to the task.

Socrates' second speech levels a strangely flattering accusation at Alcibiades: that he harbors fantastic political ambitions. This is flattering because it suggests that the fantasy Socrates describes is within the realm of possibility. It is an "accusation," as Socrates calls it, for at least two reasons. First, it exposes the disingenuous character of Alcibiades' boasting described in the first speech. Far from being without needs,

Socrates suggests, Alcibiades has devastatingly little compared with that which he aspires to gain. Second, the claim that Alcibiades hopes to rise to unprecedented heights of political power leaves unclear what means he is willing to employ to do so and what he would wish to do with his power once he obtained it. In short, Socrates comes close to accusing Alcibiades of a tyrannical hubris.

Let us look more closely at the speech. Socrates says he will accuse Alcibiades of having more on his mind than the goods enumerated in the first speech. In fact, he claims that Alcibiades is so dissatisfied with what he currently has that, were a god to offer him either to live without acquiring anything more or to die at once, he would choose to die (105a1-6). This means that Alcibiades still hopes to gain that which will make the entirety of his life worthwhile, and Socrates explains what this is. He suggests that Alcibiades believes he will come before the Athenian *demos* in a few days – we learn later that Alcibiades is about twenty years old, so he is now just old enough to address the assembly (123d4-6) – and, proving to them that he is worthy of honor such as no one has ever been (Pericles included), he will become the most powerful person in the city, in all of Greece, and among the barbarians who share the Greek mainland (105a7-b7). But even this, says Socrates, would not be enough for him, for if the same god were to forbid him from gaining control over Asia too, Alcibiades would again choose not to live "if [he] will not fill all human beings, so to speak, with [his] name and [his] power" (105b7-c4). According to Socrates' accusation, then, Alcibiades will consider his life a failure if he proves unable to ascend to godlike fame and power, and he expects that his imminent entry into Athenian politics will make manifest his worthiness of those honors.

One might well doubt whether Alcibiades had ever put his hopes to himself in such bold terms. It is more plausible to think of Socrates' accusation as giving voice to all that is implied in the strain of Alcibiades' ambition characterized by the desire for political power. The dialogue will later reveal that this is by no means the only strain of Alcibiades' ambition, and it is therefore significant that Socrates emphasizes it so strongly here at the beginning. To the extent that Socrates abstracts from the less self-aggrandizing elements of Alcibiades' aspirations, his goal seems to be to *inflate* Alcibiades' sense that he is naturally worthy of tremendous honor. But this, of course, requires that Alcibiades already have ambitions that are at least akin to what Socrates describes. What Socrates thus reveals here– in contrast to what he builds up or implants – is the sense Alcibiades has developed as a *result* of his beauty, family, city, and connection to Pericles, that he is destined for greatness, and, accompanying that sense, his conviction that anything less than greatness would be unacceptable, a disgrace, and a travesty. Socrates says that Alcibiades hopes that he will "prove to the city that [he is] worth everything to her, and that, immediately after having proved this, there will be nothing [he does] not have the power to do" (105d7-e2). The goal here described is political power understood as the power to do whatever one wishes – the same power attributed to Pericles in the first speech. Socrates now makes it clear that Alcibiades wants for himself the power to which he currently has access only through Pericles. Indeed, he wants a power still greater than that: Socrates cites as Alcibiades' models Cyrus and Xerxes, despotic Persian kings revered by their people as direct descendents of the gods (cf. 120e-121c).

If Socrates' speech were to contain nothing more than these accusations, he could be accused of employing some quite reckless rhetoric. He has conjured an image of Alcibiades rising to despotic rule over all of humanity without for a moment pausing to raise the question of why such fame and power ought to be pursued, or why one should think that they constitute the great goods of which Alcibiades believes he is worthy. That image is not, however, the sum total of Socrates' speech. The speech also contains the astounding claim that Alcibiades will be unable to see his designs through to their conclusion – and therefore, that he will be unable to make his life worth living – without Socrates (105d2-4). Socrates' hope, he says, is parallel to Alcibiades' hope: just as Alcibiades hopes to gain great power by proving to the Athenians that he is worth everything to them, Socrates hopes to gain great power over Alcibiades by proving that he is worth everything to him and that no one but he (together with the god) can provide the power Alcibiades desires (105e2-5). This, then, is how Socrates intends to overcome the "man who does not succumb to lovers" (104e4-5). He is calling Alcibiades' bluff: Alcibiades is *not* perfectly self-sufficient, as he boasts to his lovers, but still entirely lacks that which he desires most intensely. Socrates must now prove to Alcibiades that all the gifts of fortune he enjoys are not enough for him to satisfy that intense desire, and that he still needs something more, something only Socrates can provide.

Of course, none of this does anything to vindicate Socrates if his intention is simply to help Alcibiades to become a tyrant. But the dialogue will show that this is not what Socrates has in mind. Instead, he will try to execute an elaborate bait-and-switch. He will attempt to redirect Alcibiades' ambition, his exceptionally intense desire to seek

his own greatest good, by making him see that he has not adequately reflected upon what the greatest good truly is. The importance of Alcibiades' ambition for Socrates, therefore, is not simply that it provides a an opportunity to grab his attention. A powerful desire to seek one's own good is a trait shared by the tyrant and the philosopher. If Socrates inflames a kind of tyrannical desire in Alcibiades, it is only in order to show him that that desire is misdirected. Thus, Socrates began his second speech by saying, "if, Alcibiades, I had seen you content with the things I just went through [beauty, family, etc.], supposing that you ought to spend your life in the midst of them, I would have abandoned my love long ago" (104e6-8). What has drawn Socrates to Alcibiades is the deep restlessness of his desire for what is best, as this desire may enable him to endure the pain of Socratic refutation and of rigorous self-examination. Thus, Socrates concludes his speech by saying that, "when [Alcibiades] was younger, before [he was] full of so much hope … the god would not allow [their] conversing, lest [Socrates] converse in vain" (105e6-8). The greatness of Alcibiades' hope, it seems, will determine Socrates' success or failure.

And yet we still cannot say *why* Socrates wants to educate Alcibiades, and so we cannot yet say what would constitute Socratic failure or success. Likewise, it is not yet possible to say anything more about why Socrates continues to insist that what he has to offer Alcibiades is contingent on the acquiescence of a god. Let the following observation, therefore, suffice for the time being. It is not an exaggeration to say that Socrates has depicted Alcibiades as hoping to become a god. If such a hope, or something like it, is indeed an important element of Alcibiades' political ambition, then

Socrates' claim to have access to his own *daimonic* power may resonate very deeply with Alcibiades. To repeat an earlier suggestion: the claim that Alcibiades is not yet able to achieve political success is weaker than the claim that he is confused about how to secure the good of his soul. Perhaps we can say that Socrates' inflation of Alcibiades' political ambition has been calculated to draw out a desire that transcends the merely political. But, since much of this suggestion depends on evidence to be found later in the dialogue, let us turn now to the next section.

II. Refutations (106a2-112d10)

Socrates' opening speeches have succeeded.s Alcibiades does not admit to the truth of the accusation, but he is intrigued enough by the promise Socrates appears to have made to be willing to submit to Socratic questioning, whatever that entails (106a2-b8). Hence, Socrates has the opportunity to demonstrate his worth to Alcibiades by showing him that he is gravely deficient, i.e., by administering a refutation that makes Alcibiades aware of an ignorance in himself that he cannot abide. Specifically, Socrates will set out to show Alcibiades that he lacks knowledge of justice. In preparation for the refutation proper, however, Socrates must carefully elicit a number of key agreements from Alcibiades. He cannot wait until after the refutation to set out the various other premises needed to conclude that Alcibiades is deficient. Alcibiades will be far too cagey by then; he will see too clearly what Socrates is up to. Socrates must begin by setting out his still apparently innocuous – and often dubious – premises, so that Alcibiades does not see Socrates' dialectical trap slowly closing around him.

The first such premise concerns the importance of expertise for Alcibiades' political success. Alcibiades agrees immediately that the counsel he intends to offer the assembly, which will prove his great worth, will be about something he knows better than the Athenians (106c4-d1). Socrates then takes care to secure Alcibiades' agreement to an argument about the *origin* of the knowledge that will inform his good counsel: that all of his knowledge has either been learned from others or discovered independently, and therefore consists entirely of things he once did not believe he knew (106d4-e3). Socrates will later rely on this agreement to argue that Alcibiades cannot have knowledge of justice. But this shaky premise, to say nothing of other difficulties, leaves no room for the possibility of innate knowledge, knowledge acquired naturally in the course of human development, or divinely inspired knowledge – each of which is often thought to be a source of knowledge of justice.

The other premise Socrates needs to establish is that Alcibiades' counsel to the Athenians must be just counsel if it is to be good counsel. This is crucial not exactly for the execution of Socrates' refutation, but for its ultimate effectiveness. If Socrates were to show Alcibiades that he is ignorant about justice without first arguing that knowledge of justice is necessary for the fulfillment of his political ambitions, he would have failed to make good on his promise of proving indispensible to that fulfillment. This premise, however, will prove rather difficult to establish – not so much because Alcibiades does not believe in the importance of justice for good political counsel as because of the shallowness of his political thinking hitherto. The very fact that Alcibiades believes he has the expertise needed to lead Athens indicates the extent to which he believes,

consciously or not, that his soul will keep the promise his physical beauty appears to make. We will see repeatedly throughout the first half of the dialogue that Alcibiades is not counting on his physical charms or his distinguished lineage to bring him political success. He believes that he is truly the best leader Athens can have – and yet this very belief is an indication of how unready he is both for the management of political affairs and for the politics of democratic statesmanship. His lack of attention to the most basic political questions makes it difficult for him to reach the conclusion toward which Socrates wants to steer him: that justice is an indispensible component of good political policy.

First, Socrates must get Alcibiades to name the matter in which he intends to counsel the assembly on the basis of his superior knowledge. Alcibiades is easily able to disqualify Socrates' many suggestions: letters, lyre-playing, wrestling, house building, divination, health, and ship building (107a1-c12). The first three, though subjects in which Alcibiades has been educated, are matters for private education, not public deliberation. Already, then, we can see a problem for Alcibiades: political affairs are not among the subjects in which he has been educated. But then, is he any different in this regard from the other Athenian politicians? Has Alcibiades had anything but a typical Athenian education? And if not, where *do* political men receive the education required to manage public business? The puzzle is intensified by Socrates' other examples, which *are* matters upon which the assembly deliberates. But Alcibiades admits that his advice in these matters would be inferior to that of an expert regardless of his beauty, family, or

wealth. So how *do* political men, understood as men distinct from house builders, diviners, doctors, and ship builders, receive the education they need?

Alcibiades here completely overlooks what may be the most important possibility. Perhaps good counsel founded upon knowledge is *not* the most important qualification for political success. Perhaps Alcibiades' beauty, family, and wealth are much greater political assets than he appears to realize. What prevents him from getting the best of the diviner in the assembly? Might not his charm and his renown carry him very far in such a competition? Alcibiades betrays a striking naiveté in this passage. As much as his attraction to Socrates' dazzling portrait of him as ruler over all mankind may suggest a troubling tyrannical streak in Alcibiades, it now becomes clear that he has no intention of *deceiving* the Athenians for personal gain. On the contrary, he insists that his worthiness is based in the *good* he can do for them. A somewhat complex picture of Alcibiades' ambition thus begins to emerge: he will receive the greatest honors and acquire the greatest power imaginable, but he will do it by serving those he rules.

Finally, Alcibiades answers Socrates' question: he will advise the Athenians on matters of war and peace (107d3-4). Now, Alcibiades has no more expertise in these matters than he does in ship building (an art that is, incidentally, important for military operations). It therefore becomes clear that his lack of knowledge was not the primary reason for which he had no interest in advising the Athenians in the matters Socrates enumerated. Advising about house building, divination, health, or ship building lacks the *glory* of military leadership. War holds a place of unmatched gravity, dignity, even nobility among human affairs. Alcibiades senses that it is in war that his great worthiness

of honor can shine forth most brilliantly. Now, Socrates does not raise the sensible objection that Alcibiades is just as unqualified to be a military adviser as he is to advise about any other public matter. To do this would be to undercut his own tenuous claim, for Socrates cannot believably claim to be the only one able to educate Alcibiades in generalship. However, Alcibiades' claim to wish to advise in matters of war and peace in fact suits Socrates' purpose well, because it points to Alcibiades' concern for the noble or beautiful, and thus potentially to justice. Socrates' task is to help Alcibiades give clear expression to that concern, which has until now been only a nebulous part of his complex and unexamined ambition.

The elicitation from Alcibiades of a clear expression of his concern for justice on the basis of his desire to be a military advisor will require an exercise in Socratic dialectic. Alcibiades agrees to the anodyne assertions that he will advise Athens to make war and peace with whomever, at whatever time, and for however long it is "better" to do so (107d5-e4). Socrates then pushes him to clarify the meaning of this "better" by first getting him to consider what "better" means in two other contexts: wrestling on the one hand, and lyre-playing, singing, and dancing on the other (107e5-108d8). The better in wrestling, says Socrates, is the more gymnastic; so to what "better" does the singer look in accompanying his song with lyre playing and dancing? Alcibiades is unable to say, even with the Socratic hint that he must consider the art (*technē*) by which these things are done correctly (*orthōs*). It is only when Socrates has him consider that the goddesses to whom the art belongs are the "Muses" that Alcibiades realizes the art is "music," and that what is correctly done according to it is the "musical." Socrates then continues: the

more gymnastic and the more musical are the better in wrestling and singing respectively, so what is the better in war and peace? Again, Alcibiades is repeatedly unable to give a reply – a shameful failure, as he admits, since these are the matters in which he hopes to advise the assembly (108d9-109a8). Finally, Socrates gets Alcibiades to see that the key consideration is of the just and the unjust by having him consider that wars are always fought over claims of having been deceived, coerced, or robbed; this finally leads to the conclusion that the "better" in war and peace is the more just (109a9-c12).

Thus concludes Alcibiades' brief introductory lesson in Socratic dialectics. It must be said that his performance is less than impressive. His other failures to come up with answers aside, should he not have had *some* thought about the end toward which cities aim in waging war given that he wishes to become an Athenian general? Now, we can try to exonerate Alcibiades on a number of grounds. He has never experienced Socratic dialectical questioning before, and so he is surely somewhat disoriented by the unexpected twists and turns the conversation takes in straying from its previously narrow focus on his future political career. Moreover, the question of the better in war in peace is rather complicated and morally thorny. This is especially relevant given that Socrates' opening speeches may still be echoing in Alcibiades' ears, the tone and even the content of which would seem to suggest that the end to which Alcibiades will look in conducting war will be his own glorification. If such thoughts are among the first to come to Alcibiades' mind, a kind of confused shame may contribute to his inability to supply Socrates with an answer. And finally, it may be worth noting that Alcibiades is in each case very quick to note his own inability to answer, and even to acknowledge the

shamefulness of that inability in the most important instance. He is astute and courageous in recognizing his own ignorance, and this may be a desirable trait in a Socratic pupil.

Still, we must not minimize the extent to which this exchange will appear incongruous to the reader who is expecting to see Socrates converse with one of the shrewdest, most gifted, most impressive politicians Athens ever knew. We can only conclude that the fumbling young man we see here is not yet the clever and capable (albeit reckless and immoderate) statesman he will eventually become. This conclusion in turn prompts the suggestion that Alcibiades' transformation into the figure we know from Thucydides and elsewhere owes something to the Socratic education that begins in the *Alcibiades*. Could it be that Socrates *does* ultimately remedy the lack that separates this young Alcibiades from political success? The passage we have just been considering may serve as an important example of a kind of Socratic training: Socrates has begun to teach Alcibiades how to categorize human affairs according to the *good* at which they aim. But how could this kind of exercise ever contribute to Alcibiades' political success?

Of course, an adequate answer to this question has not yet been made clear in the dialogue, and may well require a consideration of more than is given in the *Alcibiades*. But we can begin to shed some light on these matters by considering more carefully the examples Socrates employs throughout this discussion of the "better." By means of explicit juxtaposition, Socrates prompts us to consider the wrestling teacher and the musician as analogs to the advisor to the Athenian assembly on matters of war and peace. The wrestling teacher demands perfect obedience from his pupil. The training will be

difficult, even painful; lapses in dedication, focus, or mental toughness will be met with stern punishment; sometimes, the pupil will benefit from fighting against, losing to, and thus learning from a superior opponent. The general and the wrestling teacher both wish to train the best possible fighters – but can the former, especially in a democracy, reasonably expect to employ the same tactics as the latter without incurring the distrust, even the hatred of the demos? Perhaps some knowledge akin to the musician's is required as a supplement. The musical education, as opposed to the gymnastic, revolves around the pleasure human beings take in the apprehension of beauty. The musician, therefore, has an appreciation of beauty and, above all, an ability to produce it so as to evoke a range of emotional responses in the listener. In this same passage, Socrates suggests that Alcibiades, though not a doctor, would advise that the more healthy is the better with respect to food (108e5-9) – and yet, as the *Gorgias* teaches us, the chef who argues that the better in food is the more *pleasant* has a certain advantage over the doctor. Here, then, is an important political lesson Alcibiades may be yet to learn: that the democratic statesman, in addition to being a sound judge of the better and worse for the *polis*, must also be able to appeal rhetorically to the people's admiration of the beautiful or noble (*to kalon*).

This lesson is never learned more fully, however, than when it is founded upon an understanding of one's own concern for the noble, and Socrates now begins to lead Alcibiades toward such an understanding by examining his concern for justice. Alcibiades has agreed that the "better" in matters of war and peace is the more just, albeit with a hint of ambivalence. He seems to acknowledge that war against the just may

sometimes be necessary, though never lawful (109b9-c5). Alcibiades thus displays his belief (inchoate as it may be) that justice is sanctioned by a code of law that stands above the laws created by the lawgivers in the cities, even as he evinces some doubt as to whether it is always possible or advantageous to obey that higher law. Of these conflicting opinions, the latter, doubting one is clearly less noble (as Socrates points out), and thus Alcibiades is at present less willing to pursue or defend it: he agrees that war must be guided by justice. But Alcibiades' hesitation here will help us to understand his reaction to the coming refutations.

With the key premises in place – that all knowledge is either learned or discovered following a recognition of ignorance, and that Alcibiades will advise the Athenians in matters of war and peace with an eye to the more just – Socrates is ready to administer the refutation. His goal is to convince Alcibiades that he lacks the knowledge of justice he will need in order to advise the Athenians correctly, and thus to achieve political success. Socrates begins by pressing Alcibiades to say who his teacher was from whom he learned to distinguish the more and less just, and Alcibiades' response is to suggest that he had no such teacher but sought and discovered the knowledge on his own (109d1-e6). As Socrates reminds him, however, Alcibiades has agreed that he could only have sought to know something of which he supposed himself to be ignorant, and he proves unable to name a time in his life when he did not suppose he knew the just from the unjust (109e7-110d2). Socrates makes this clear by reminding Alcibiades of how, as a child, he would loudly accuse his playmates of injustice in their games. Moreover, Alcibiades now forcefully reaffirms his past judgments – his understanding of the just

and unjust has not apparently changed since his childhood. It is the same understanding by which he identified deception, coercion, and theft as instances of injustice (109b1-6). We thus acquire an important insight into the foundation of Alcibiades' conception of justice: it is a conception that springs in part from the basic ability to recognize infringements upon one's own good, in combination with some knowledge of the rules or laws that forbid such infringement. If Alcibiades is not exceptional in this regard, but rather a paradigmatic case of the human concern for justice, then it seems that justice has a combination of natural and conventional sources. Perhaps it is by gaining clarity on the distinction between these sources – and thereby, on the way in which that distinction naturally comes to be blurred in the course of ordinary moral education – that one can begin to dispel some of the most puzzling paradoxes surrounding the unity and coherence of the idea of justice.

Alcibiades would appear to be refuted – he cannot name a time at which he supposed himself ignorant about justice, and so he cannot claim to know it from having sought it. But he is still, quite reasonably, unwilling to accept the bizarre conclusion that he does not know what justice is. He therefore reverts to the possibility that he gained his knowledge of justice from teachers, and names as his teachers "the many" (110d5-e1). Against Socrates' objection that the many are not "serious teachers" – they wouldn't even be able to teach such a paltry thing as draughts-playing – Alcibiades argues that they, after all, taught him to speak Greek, which is no paltry thing (110e2-111a4). Socrates must now undertake a second refutation. He must demonstrate to Alcibiades that the many, despite their ability to teach Greek, cannot impart knowledge of justice. His

strategy in this refutation rests on two considerations: that good teachers know whereof they teach, and that there is broad agreement among the many on those matters which they know (111a11-b10). Socrates argues that the agreement among the many about the meanings of Greek words is indication of their shared knowledge, and thus of their competence as teachers. Alcibiades admits, however, that it is precisely over justice that the greatest disagreements arise: how can the many be said to share knowledge of the very thing which drives them to make war upon and kill one another? The many, then, cannot be invoked as adequate teachers of justice. Once again, Alcibiades finds himself refuted (111b11-112d10).

The refutation is sufficient to persuade Alcibiades that the many cannot be trusted to have taught him about justice well or correctly. But Socrates never denies that the many were in fact his teachers, those who provided him with whatever conception of justice he possesses. Alcibiades may in fact have hit upon an important point by suggesting that he learned to recognize justice in something like the way he learned to speak Greek. For does not Alcibiades' knowledge of the words "justice" and "injustice" – and his ability correctly to identify instances of these – give him some claim to know what justice and injustice are? Consider Socrates' own example: that the many are knowers of Greek can be seen from the fact that they agree as to what sort of thing "stone" or "wood" is, and do not mistakenly reach for one when they desire the other (111b11-c4). Knowledge of any language is thus in large part the ability to recognize the natural similarities and distinctions among the beings, or the categories into which the language groups them. To know a word and to be able to use it correctly, then, is in some

sense tantamount to having knowledge of the underlying category represented by the word. Admittedly, this type of knowledge does not rise to the standard of *science* (*epistēmē*), but neither is it nothing at all. Why can Alcibiades not claim that he knows "justice" just as he knows "stone" or "wood?"

The answer contained explicitly in Socrates' refutation is not altogether conclusive. To illustrate that nothing is so fiercely contested among the many as justice, Socrates points to battles in which Athens has fought, including the battle in which Alcibiades' father was killed, and to the conflicts presented in Homer: the Trojan War in the case of the *Iliad*, and Odysseus' confrontation with Penelope's suitors in the *Odyssey*. But do these examples prove Socrates' point? One could argue that it is not justice but *love* and the jealously it begets that give rise to the Homeric conflicts (cf. 111e11-112a9 with *Greater Hippias* 294c8-d2). As for the Athenian defeats at Tangara and Coronea, both were results of Athens' attempt to expand and consolidate her empire in Boeotia. Of course, claims about justice enter into all of these conflicts at some point, and our understanding of them cannot be complete without consideration of those claims. But reflection upon Socrates' examples prompts us to ask *why* claims of justice have the character he indicates. That is, what causes the confusion whereby people fiercely disagree over what constitutes the just resolution of a dispute? Why does the same education that taught them to tell a stick from a stone not now serve them in distinguishing justice from injustice?

Some light is shed on this matter by Socrates' other examples of things about which the many disagree. He has Alcibiades consider, "if we wished to know not only

what sorts of things human beings or horses are, but also which of them are skilled at running (*dromikoi*) and which not, would the many still be capable of teaching this?" and then, "if we wished to know not only what sorts of things human beings are, but what kinds are healthy and sick, would the many then be capable teachers for us?" (111d6-9, e4-6). Alcibiades agrees in both cases that the disagreement of the many on these matters is sufficient evidence of their being poor teachers of them. But what are the sources of the disagreements? Note an important difference between the two questions: in the first case, the many are asked to say which *particular* human beings or horses are skilled at running; in the second, they are asked to describe healthy and sick human beings in the *abstract*. Each requires a kind of comparison: the first requires a comparison of individual people or horses; the second requires a comparison of classes, of one kind of human being (viz., the healthy kind) to its opposite. Now, the many disagree about *who* is a skilled runner because the prize of honor is at stake. Proud athletes and boasters alike, as well as their families and other supporters, will raise claims to their own skill and even disparage potential competitors. The many disagree about the healthy and the sick, on the other hand, because, while there is much at stake for them in this knowledge, they lack the scientific expertise, possessed by the doctor, to be able to identify the essential characteristics of health and sickness.

Each of these examples shares something important with the case of justice. As with skill in running, people will insist on the superiority of their own claims to justice on account of the honor that is at stake, and this will often come at the expense of their clarity or honesty. Why human beings consider justice honorable, and why they are so

concerned to lay claim to this honor are important questions prompted by this reflection but not yet answered (though one might begin by returning to and following out our earlier reflection on the twin sources of Alcibiades' concern for justice). As with health and sickness, people in general have not given sufficient attention to the question of what are the key distinguishing factors separating the just from the unjust. Of course, there are many cases in which most people will easily be able to tell the difference between actual healthy and sick human beings, just as Alcibiades was able to identify deception, coercion, and theft as kinds of injustice. But, as the first book of the *Republic* illustrates, coming up with a clear and consistent definition of justice and injustice proves to be a puzzling and frustrating challenge. It requires long and painstaking study in which most people never engage. One important prerequisite of such a study would be skill in dialectics, i.e., the ability carefully and precisely to analyze abstract concepts in speech. This may have been indicated by Socrates' reference to the inability of the many to teach draughts-playing (cf. 110e5-7 with *Republic* 487b1-c3 and *Hipparchus* 229e2-6).

But we must keep in mind that the confusion of the many concerning justice, their disagreements sprung from competition over honors and other prizes and from lack of clarity in understanding, only make them *bad* teachers of justice – it does nothing to dispose of the possibility that Alcibiades is right in naming them as his teachers. This means that these confusions and disagreements exist not only between individuals and cities, but even within individuals, since their education comes precisely from the disagreeing many. For example, Alcibiades believes that unjust war is both unlawful and, at least sometimes, necessary. This is not to say that the just and unjust are taught

simply at random. As Socrates quietly reminds us, there are impressive figures who are influential in the formation of conventional opinion concerning justice, such as Homer, who claimed to have been divinely inspired (112a10-b4). But it does mean that Alcibiades is certain to be benighted by hazy and conflicting understandings of justice that he has never adequately expressed or examined. Now, we might praise Alcibiades for his quickness in acknowledging the problem Socrates exposes: he does not object to the suggestion that the battle of Coronea is evidence of the ignorance of the many. That is, he does not respond in spirited defense of the justice of the cause for which his father fought and died – perhaps the fact that he hardly knew his father, and that he has come to revere his adopted father Pericles so highly (see *sumpantōn*, 104b3), makes that psychological obstacle less significant. But Alcibiades still has a long way to go before he can turn to a clear-sighted examination of his own ignorance or confusions. For, as the next exchange reveals, Alcibiades does not yet appreciate the full gravity of the refutation he has just undergone.

Upon careful reflection, these Socratic refutations contain a wealth of insight into Alcibiades' concern for justice, and indeed into the human concern for justice generally; so much so that Socrates cannot expect Alcibiades to appreciate all of it in the course of the discussion. It seems that Plato's writing is intended both to maintain a clear logic and meaning internal to the dialogue, and to provide the reader with food for thought that Socrates' interlocutors cannot reasonably have time to digest. Or perhaps Socrates is planting suggestions and insinuations like seeds in Alcibiades' mind, so that certain questions will naturally arise as he later reflects back on the conversation. If so, we may

wonder whether some of the insights we have gleaned into the character of justice from this conversation are ones that Socrates helps Alcibiades to elaborate in later conversations, ones which take place out of view, between the conversations represented in Plato's dialogues. In any case, we are now able to move forward in this dialogue with a greater appreciation of the character of Alcibiades' concern for and confusion about justice and law Next, Alcibiades must deal with the paradoxical assertion that he lacks knowledge of the just and unjust things.

III. Exhortation (112e1-113d8)

Socrates has performed two refutations, each one purporting to conclude that Alcibiades cannot have knowledge of justice. Given his earlier agreement that the "better" in war and peace is the more just, Alcibiades should now be faced with the troubling suggestion that he is unfit to lead the Athenians. But Alcibiades subtly evinces some skepticism as to whether Socrates' refutations have established what they claim to have established, which Socrates astutely detects. When Socrates attempts to drive the refutation home by asking how it could be likely that Alcibiades knows the just and unjust things, Alcibiades responds, "From the things *you* say, it is not likely" (112d7-10, my emphasis). Socrates recognizes from this response that Alcibiades has not fully accepted the conclusion that he is ignorant about the just and unjust things. He is not under the impression that his own opinions have been the ones under examination. Socrates must therefore provide Alcibiades with some instruction on the meaning, method, and purpose of Socratic refutation. Only then will Alcibiades be able to

recognize the course of action prescribed by the refutation's revelation of his ignorance. This Socratic explanation thus amounts to an exhortation, a counsel to respond to the refutation with the appropriate measures.

Socrates gives Alcibiades the following basic lesson in the meaning of Socratic refutation: it is the answerer, not the questioner, who stakes out the positions taken in the discussion (113a7-b7). It is therefore not Socrates, but "Alcibiades, the beautiful son of Kleinias" who has himself concluded, in answering Socrates' questions, that he "does not know about just and unjust things, but supposes he does, and intends to go to counsel the Athenians in the assembly about things he does not know" (113b8-11). Despite his beauty and his family, it has come to light that Alcibiades is not fit for political rule. When Alcibiades half-heartedly accepts this conclusion, Socrates sharpens and repeats it: Alcibiades, according to his own opinion, has "in mind to undertake a crazy undertaking … to teach things which [he does] not know, not having taken care to learn them" (113c5-7). This formulation seems to point to a simple solution to the problem that has been discovered: Alcibiades must attempt to learn about the just and unjust things before entering politics. He could, of course, try to learn this on his own, but the entire conversation has been set up as Socrates' attempt to prove that *he* can provide what Alcibiades needs. It would be rather sensible for Alcibiades to turn to Socrates as a teacher, and we expect Socrates to exhort him, or to continue to exhort him, to do just that.

But Socrates has chosen a strange manner in which to clarify Alcibiades' deficiency in this passage. He seems to have gone out of his way to rub Alcibiades' nose

in his foolishness, re-explaining the folly of his ambition in harsher terms, calling it "crazy," even after Alcibiades has owned up to it. He makes it painfully clear that the refutations have not been abstract exercises, but an affront to Alcibiades' sense of worth, since they make utterly untenable his belief that he deserves the greatest honor from the Athenians. Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that Alcibiades does not at this moment turn to Socrates for guidance, but rather rebels against him and his refutation. He flees the deeply troubling conclusion upon which Socrates is insisting by rejecting one of its core premises: that the more just is the "better" in matters of war and peace, a position about which he evinced some ambivalence when he suggested that war against the just might sometimes be necessary (109c1-3). Now, Alcibiades appears ready to embrace that more cynical position whole-heartedly.

> I suppose, Socrates, that Athenians and the other Greeks rarely deliberate as to whether things are more just or more unjust; for they believe that such things are clear, so they let them go and consider which will be advantageous to those doing them. For I suppose that the just things and the advantageous things are not the same, but that it has profited many to commit great injustices, and I suppose that for others who did just things, there was no advantage. (113d1-8)

Alcibiades appeals here to empirical evidence: is it not clear that the unjust often prosper? And if being just sometimes means accepting crushing defeat, how can the more just be the better in war and peace?

It may be tempting to think that this is an expression of Alcibiades' true view; that he had earlier allowed the more just to be the better in war and peace only out of reluctance to admit his actual, immoral opinion. But that suggestion goes too far in that it fails to appreciate the extent to which the first refutations have exposed a genuine concern for justice in Alcibiades. To be sure, he sees an undeniable force to the argument

that war is fought for the sake of advantage. But even as he lays out that position here, he betrays a sustained uncertainty or ambivalence by thrice qualifying his remarks with "I suppose" (*oimai*). It is neither morality nor cynicism that alone characterizes Alcibiades' "true" position, but rather a confused mixture of the two: the refutation has indeed revealed his belief in the importance of knowing and looking to justice in war and peace, and yet he is aware of a troubling objection to that conclusion. His adoption here of the more cynical position is therefore not a revelation of his firm and abiding conviction. Rather, it is his forceful reaction against the psychologically shattering conclusion that Socrates is pushing him to accept – a reaction that relies upon and takes refuge in an argument not without force, but which also carries a certain shame that would otherwise prevent Alcibiades from espousing it. The result of his taking this stand is the apparently premature curtailing of the exhortation. It would seem that Alcibiades has failed to face up to the result of the refutations, and so Socrates must mount a new attempt to prove Alcibiades' deficiency and his own ability to resolve it.

Before turning to that renewed attempt, however, we might pause to consider whether Socrates' account of the meaning of the refutations (i.e. that they are nothing more than expositions of the refuted interlocutor's opinions) is satisfactory. Socrates quietly indicates that this claim is dubious through his reference to Euripides' *Hippolytus*. He paraphrases the line, spoken by Phaedra to her nurse, "these things you hear from yourself, not from me" (*Hippolytus*, 352). In the play, Phaedra has at length provided her nurse with enough clues to guess her dark secret. Socrates, then, suggests that it has indeed been he who has, by subtly guiding Alcibiades in the discussion, allowed him to

arrive at a conclusion Socrates himself has had in mind from the start (compare *Meno* 82b9-85c1). By downplaying his role in Alcibiades' arrival at the conclusions he reaches, Socrates diverts attention away from the question of his own motivation. Hence, in recognizing the inadequacy or incompleteness of Socrates' account of the meaning, method, and purpose of his refutations, we are bound to be struck by this puzzling but crucial question: what is Socrates really up to?

It is Socrates' exhortations in the *Alcibiades* which, by stepping back from the refutations and purporting to explain them, most prompt this line of questioning. It is also in the exhortations that Plato begins quietly to provide some answers to the reader most likely to have taken up that questioning. This first exhortation is extremely brief; as we have said, Alcibiades' rebellion interrupts it before its exhortative character is even made explicit. Accordingly, we are given only the faintest hints here as to the character of Socrates' project. These are provided in the two hypothetical conversations Socrates describes as examples of the fact that it is the answerer and not the questioner who makes assertions in the discussion. In these conversations, Socrates asks Alcibiades about the relative magnitudes of the one and the two, and about the letters in "Socrates" (112e10-3a6). What might it mean for these hypothetical conversations to be metaphors for the actual conversation that has just taken place? The question of the relative magnitudes of the one and the two, while apparently trivial, is one which represented an important stumbling block and key transitional phase in Socrates' own philosophic development as he recounts it in the *Phaedo* (97a1-b3). It would seem, then, that there is an important question at stake in the subject matter under discussion, which Alcibiades is not yet able

to recognize. What might that question concern? Again, we are given only a maddeningly vague wisp of a clue in the suggestion that the discussion may be analogous to one about the letters in Socrates' name: perhaps Socrates is attempting to investigate something about himself.

Part Two

I. Speech (113d9-114b3)

Socrates has ostensibly set out to show Alcibiades that he cannot fulfill his political ambitions without first acquiring knowledge only Socrates can provide, knowledge of the better in war and peace. When that was said to be the more just, Socrates tried to show Alcibiades that he lacked knowledge of justice. But Alcibiades has now impishly revised his answer from the more just to the more advantageous, and so it would seem that Socrates in turn must show him that he lacks knowledge of advantage. When Socrates begins to suggest that this is what he intends, Alcibiades responds sneeringly: "For what prevents me [from having such knowledge], Socrates? Unless you will ask me again from whom I learned it or how I found it myself" (113d9-e4). Alcibiades now clearly denies the validity of the preceding refutations – not from careful reflection on the soundness of their logic, but as a result of his indignation at what they imply about his worth. Socrates, in turn, launches into a scathing rebuke of Alcibiades' childish petulance, in which he first insists that he will indeed press Alcibiades to say where he obtained his knowledge of the advantageous, and likens Alcibiades' threats to reject such an approach to the tantrum of a spoiled brat (113e5-114a4). But then, Socrates suddenly and perplexingly changes course, saying now that it is a foregone conclusion that Alcibiades "will not be able to demonstrate that [he knows] the advantageous either from having found it, or from having learned it," and that being "spoiled" or "effeminate" (*truphais*) as he is, Alcibiades would no longer "taste the same argument with pleasure." Therefore, says Socrates, he will let the question of Alcibiades'

knowledge of the advantageous go, and instead ask him to prove "whether the same things are both just and advantageous or not" (114a4-b3). The overall impression of Socrates' harangue, then, is that he could have succeeded by applying the same refutation again with advantage in the place of justice, but that he will provide a new set of considerations in deference to Alcibiades' shamefully childish and unmanly rebellion.

But as the sequel will show, Socrates' rebuke is quite effective in getting Alcibiades to own up to his shameful behavior. It seems that Socrates could therefore easily have readministered his previous refutation with advantage in the place of justice. It thus becomes clear that the change of course in Socrates' speech is not in fact a concession to Alcibiades' stubborn recalcitrance, since this was effectively overcome. Rather, Socrates has in mind to expose not just any ignorance in Alcibiades, but specifically his ignorance concerning justice – it would not suit Socrates' purpose to refute him simply on the question of advantage, even though it would show, as much as the last refutation, Alcibiades' unreadiness for political life. As we will see, it is precisely Socrates' new question, that of the *relationship* between justice and advantage, that he wants his next refutation to address. Thus, we should not understand this short speech and the preceding short exhortation as results of Alcibiades' failure to appreciate the upshot of the first refutations. It now seems that Socrates *wanted* to bring about Alcibiades' rebellion, because it allows him to plunge deeper into the heart of Alcibiades' confusion concerning justice, and thereby most fully to awaken him to the gravity of his ignorance.

II. Refutation (114b4-116e4)

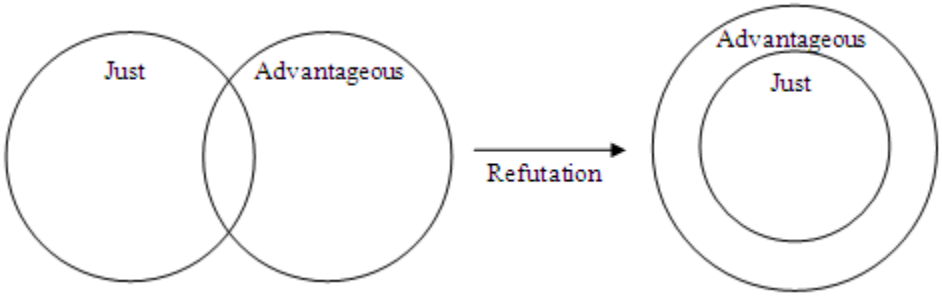
Socrates' harsh rebuke succeeds in subduing the indignant Alcibiades, whose reaction is rather like that of a shamefaced child: he has been made to feel ashamed of the childishness of his rebellion, for which Socrates had berated him. Thus, he replies sheepishly to Socrates' demand to provide him with a demonstration of the sameness or difference of just and advantageous things, admitting his inability to do so (114b4-5). But Alcibiades' shame is not restricted to the way he has behaved: he also appears to regret the morally questionable position he adopted. Thus, when Socrates insists that he defend the thesis that "the just is sometimes not advantageous," Alcibiades calls him "hubristic" (114d5-7). He no longer wishes to maintain that position, and seems to plead for Socrates to stop pushing him to stand by it. In fact, the sting of the refutations and of Socrates' scolding are enough to make Alcibiades want to recoil from the discussion altogether: when Socrates proposes to demonstrate "the opposite" of Alcibiades' claim about justice and advantage, Alcibiades at first declines to resume his role as answerer; it his desire "to be most persuaded" of the advantageousness of justice that draws Alcibiades back into the discussion (114d8-115a1). Hence we can see that Alcibiades really does have an aversion to the opposition of the just and the advantageous he has presented – he is eager to learn of its refutation from Socrates, as is Glaucon in the *Republic*.

Something remarkable emerges in Alcibiades' eagerness to learn from Socrates here. He is now motivated by the moral gravity of the question of justice in a manner at least partially independent from his political ambition. Just as Socrates' decision to take

up the question of the relationship between justice and advantage – rather than that of Alcibiades' knowledge of advantage simply – signals a Socratic intention separate from his claim to be able bring Alcibiades' hopes to completion, Alcibiades' eagerness to pursue this new Socratic question also reveals *his* desire to learn something from Socrates besides what had apparently been promised. This second part of the dialogue, therefore, represents the peak of what we might call Alcibiades' philosophic curiosity. As if to remind us of how apparently distinct this is from what Alcibiades *really* needs in order to succeed politically, the brief exchange following Socrates' short speech highlights a blind spot from which Alcibiades suffers throughout the dialogue: he does not recognize the difference between teaching and persuading (cf. 113c5-7). He foolishly agrees that, since the assembly is made up of individuals, persuading them of the difference between justice and advantage is no different than persuading Socrates, just as a grammarian or a mathematician "persuades" one about the things he knows in the same way as he would "persuade" many (114b6-d3). Alcibiades does not understand, has perhaps not even considered, the purpose or power of rhetoric (cf. *Gorgias* 455a2-7). But will his Socratic education in justice somehow help him to recognize and remedy that deficiency after all?

Socrates is now ready to refute Alcibiades' claim that the just is sometimes disadvantageous. One can represent the change Socrates wants to effect on Alcibiades' position as shown in Figure 1.

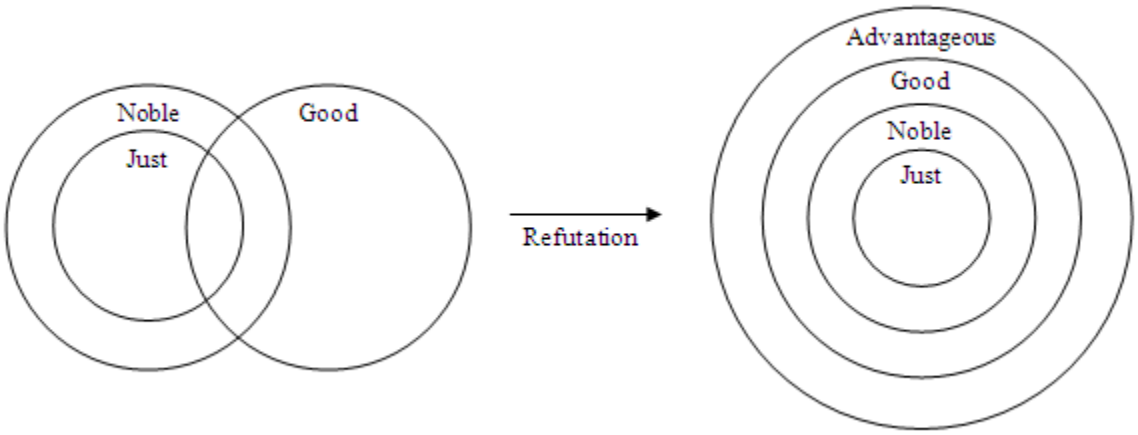
Figure 1: The challenge of Socrates' second refutation



So, whereas Alcibiades begins by claiming to believe that the just is sometimes advantageous and sometimes not, Socrates must persuade him that the just is *always* advantageous. We can begin to see Socrates' strategy as soon as he begins: he immediately introduces the noble, the shameful, and the good into the discussion, quickly obtaining Alcibiades' agreement that "all just things are also noble" and never shameful. However, in an apparent explanation of his core position, Alcibiades claims to think that noble things are sometimes good and sometimes bad (115a3-16). Socrates thus shifts the terms of the discussion from justice and advantage to nobility and goodness. Figure 2 illustrates the goal of the refutation under these new terms.

In short, Socrates must demonstrate to Alcibiades – or rather, show Alcibiades that he already believes – that the noble is always good, and then add the apparently unobjectionable claim that the good is always advantageous. If he can do this, the syllogism will be irresistible: the just is noble, the noble is good, and the good is advantageous, therefore the just is advantageous.

Figure 2: The redefined challenge of Socrates' second refutation



The crux of the matter has thus become Alcibiades' professed belief that some noble things are bad. Ostensibly to clarify what Alcibiades has in mind, Socrates asks whether he means something like "saving comrades or relatives in war," since those who do this are often wounded or killed, while those who shirk their duties escape unscathed (115b1-3). Alcibiades affirms that this is the sort of thing he means, and agrees also that what is noble in such a deed is the courage, the attempt to save those in need, while the death and wounds are what is bad (115b4-10). Socrates is thus enabled emphatically to separate courage from death. The former, Alcibiades asserts, is among the greatest good things, the things he most wants for himself – he would "choose not to live if [he] were a coward" – while the latter is among the worst evils. "Life and courage are therefore most opposed to death and cowardice" (115c1-d14). Alcibiades' acceptance of this opposition is the key to the refutation. Socrates makes him see that the *nobility* of saving friends in fact refers to what is exaltedly *good* in it, viz., the courage. By highlighting Alcibiades' ardent belief in the goodness of courage or manliness (*andreia*), Socrates is able to draw

out his deep conviction that nobility as such – i.e., abstracting from any adverse side effects that may happen to coincide with this or that particular noble deed – is always good (115e1-116b1). That the noble is always good is precisely the conclusion Socrates needs to reach; if Alcibiades would accept the additional claim that the good is always advantageous, Socrates could now wrap up his proof that the just is always advantageous.

And yet, the manner of Alcibiades' agreement to the conclusion that "none of the noble things, insofar as it is noble, is bad, nor is any of the shameful things, insofar as it is shameful, good," betrays a half-conscious reservation – he answers only, "it appears not" (116a10-b1). To see the likely source of Alcibiades' vaguely felt uncertainty, let us begin by considering the role of the shameful in the argument. This calls for special attention because Socrates introduces the shameful along with the noble at the beginning of the refutation, but then makes no mention of it until the conclusion just quoted. By largely leaving out the shameful, Socrates greatly obscures an important logical implication of the argument to which he barely points in saying, "if indeed you call [the action of dying and being courageous] bad insofar as it accomplishes a bad, it must also be called good insofar as it accomplishes a good … and therefore, noble insofar as it is good, and shameful insofar as it is bad" (115e15-116a4). This would mean that dying, even to save a friend in war, is *shameful*. Yet this immediately strikes us as incongruous: such a death, as Alcibiades would likely agree, is considered supremely noble. But Socrates' key move in the refutation is to deny that death is noble, and to say rather that *courage* is noble and death is bad. As reasonable as this may have seemed at first glance, we must now admit that it fundamentally distorts our experience of the noble.

Courageous actions are noble, not *despite* the dangers they entail and the sacrifices for which they call, but precisely because of them. The separation of courage and death to which Alcibiades agrees would seem to contain the thought that acting nobly would be infinitely better if one could only be sure that no sacrifice would be required. But if it were not a call to sacrifice, the action would not be noble. The apparent goodness of nobility springs paradoxically from its badness. Or rather, from its badness for oneself – there is an appropriate ambiguity in Socrates' speaking of the good or bad accomplishments of noble or shameful actions: good or bad for whom?

The paradox of the noble consists in the noble's somehow being good for oneself because it requires one to abandon or sacrifice one's own good for the sake of a good that is not one's own. But Socrates leaves virtually all of this unsaid, making clear only that Alcibiades understands the noble to be good, and going so far as to suggest that any badness for oneself, any sacrifice, is utterly opposed to the noble. That Alcibiades agrees weakly to the conclusion, then, is not altogether surprising: he is forced to admit that he believes the noble to be good, and yet something about Socrates' presentation must seem to him strangely out of joint with reality.

As we have said, Socrates is now in a position easily to conclude the syllogism whereby the just is proven to be advantageous. Rather than do so, however, he first takes a detour in order to draw out some more implications of Alcibiades' belief that the noble is good. Independently of the preceding refutation, Socrates exposes Alcibiades' belief that those who act nobly "act well" or prosper (*eu prattein*), and that this living nobly or beautifully and well or prosperously provides one with good things, and thereby with

happiness (*eudaimonia*) (116b2-10). The independence of these conclusions from the preceding refutation indicates that Alcibiades' love of courage is not the only source of his belief in the goodness of nobility. He also believes in a more general way that one cannot live well without being noble, and that good things will come to those who do good and noble things. So little does this strain of Alcibiades' belief distinguish between the good and the noble that, failing to notice Socrates' specious logic, he here agrees that the good and the noble are in fact "the same" (116c1-5). But what is revealed most powerfully by this digression is that there is more at stake for Alcibiades in the Socratic refutations than his political career: the very possibility of his obtaining happiness now appears to hang on these questions of the noble and the good.

Socrates finally leads Alcibiades to the conclusion: the good things, Alcibiades affirms, are advantageous, and since the noble things are good and the just things are noble, the just things must be advantageous (116c7-d4). Again, Alcibiades' agreement is rather weak: "it's likely." And then, when Socrates asks whether Alcibiades was not the answerer in the refutation, he says only, "I appear to be, as is likely" (116d5-6). But Alcibiades gives proper expression to his uncertainty only once Socrates pushes him to draw the conclusion that anyone who claims that "the just things are sometimes bad" in advising his city is laughable (116d7-e1). The refutation, which relied heavily on Alcibiades' admiration of courage rather than justice, abstracted from the question of sound political counsel that sparked it. Now that Socrates reintroduces that question, Alcibiades becomes utterly confused: "But, by the gods, Socrates, I myself don't know what I mean, but I really seem to be in a strange condition; for when you question me, it

seems to me one way at one time, and another at another" (116e2-4). On the one hand, Alcibiades admits that the refutation has genuinely exposed his belief that it is good to be noble. One the other hand, he can no more deny now than before the empirical evidence to which he then alluded, to the effect that it is often the unjust who appear to prosper. This admission of confusion about justice is the most significant recognition of ignorance the Platonic Alcibiades ever expresses. Socrates must now turn to exhortation so that Alcibiades can be made to see what is called for by such recognition. Before turning to that section, however, we may note that Socrates never fully elaborates the paradoxical character of the noble. It is apparently not his way to lay such things out with total clarity. Rather, he has allowed Alcibiades to recognize a problem by bringing two of his contrary opinions about an important matter to light. Much of the work of examining and dissecting those opinions is thus left to the Socratic pupil, and Alcibiades' ultimate success or failure as such a pupil may be determined in large part by his ability and willingness thoroughly to carry out the necessary analysis of his own beliefs and hopes.

III. Exhortation (116e5-119c1)

Socrates' exhortation largely leaves behind the substance of the refutation that precedes it, and instead takes up an analysis of the disorienting effect the refutation has had on Alcibiades. In this way, Socrates signals that his goal all along has been to elicit the admission of confusion that Alcibiades has just expressed. Socrates now begins to consider what would have to be the case for someone unwillingly to answer the same

question differently at different times, as Alcibiades has. First, he notes that such a person would have to be ignorant of the subject matter in question; Alcibiades' "wandering" (*planasthai*) on the questions of the just, the noble, the good, and the advantageous therefore imply that he lacks knowledge of these things (116e5-117a11). But lack of knowledge is not by itself enough to make one wander in this way, for one will not make contradictory claims about things one does not know so long as one is *aware* of one's ignorance in the matter. In such cases, one defers to the expert – Alcibiades agrees that he would turn his work over to a chef or a pilot rather than form wandering opinions about how to cook or which way to turn the rudder (117b1-d5). Moreover, continues Socrates, this distinction between recognized and unrecognized ignorance helps us to understand the phenomenon of *error*. For those who err "are surely not the knowers," nor are they those who, knowing they are ignorant, turn their work over to experts. It is the ones who act on account of the *false* opinion that they know what they are doing, who are ignorant of their own ignorance, who make mistakes, and those who are thus ignorant of the greatest things do the greatest harm and are the most shameful. Alcibiades cannot name subjects greater than those about which his own opinions have been wandering, and so he admits with concern that he himself has been falsely presuming to know the greatest things (117d6-118b3).

Socrates concludes that Alcibiades "dwells[s] in the utmost stupidity (*amathia*), as the argument, as well as [Alcibiades himself] accuses [him]," and that this is why Alcibiades "rush[es] toward the political things before having been educated" (118b4-8). The ground has been laid for Socrates to draw the conclusion toward which he has been

driving: Alcibiades, ignorant of the greatest things, is unready for political life, bound in fact to commit the most egregious blunders if he does not first seek education. Now, in order to make good on his promise and to ensure that Alcibiades turns to *him* for the education he needs, Socrates must prove that *only he* can provide it (cf. *Theages* 127d3-128b8). But this requirement entails a surprising danger. For by claiming that no one else possesses the wisdom Socrates has to impart, Socrates must seem to imply that none of the most distinguished and successful statesmen has failed for lack of this Socratic wisdom. In an ironic twist, Socrates' claim to be Athens' sole educator calls into question the value of his education; unless, that is, Alcibiades has become sufficiently convinced of the sovereign importance and urgency of the ignorance Socrates has revealed in him.

Socrates thus proceeds to claim that, "the many of those doing the things of this city" suffer from the same ignorance as Alcibiades, "except for a few, perhaps including your guardian, Pericles" (118a8-c2). The mention of Pericles triggers an insight for Alcibiades. He notes that Pericles is said to have become wise by association with "many wise men, including Pythocleides and Anaxagoras," and that "even now, at his age," he spends time with Damon for this reason (118c3-6). It seems that Alcibiades – who has not himself spent time with sophists (106e7-9) – suddenly realizes why actual and aspiring statesmen would want to spend time in study: successful politicians have acquired some knowledge or skill that the rest do not posses. This may be as close as Alcibiades comes in this dialogue to recognizing his need to learn rhetoric (cf. *Phaedrus* 270a3-8). But as soon as Alcibiades shares his insight, Socrates turns against Pericles,

and sets out to show that he is not in fact among the wise. He argues that the wise must be able to make others wise – that "it is a beautiful proof that the knowers know whenever they are able to produce another knower." But Alcibiades is unable to name anyone whom Pericles has made wiser, including himself (118c7-119a7). Now, besides being his guardian, Pericles is the model for Alcibiades' political ambition (104b3-9, 105a7 ff.). If he of all people is not wise, then Socrates would appear to be the only point of light on Alcibiades' horizon. Socrates is therefore ready to ask Alcibiades, "What, then, do you intend to do about yourself? Will you let yourself be as you are now, or take some care [of yourself]?" (119a8-9).

But Alcibiades fails the test. He concludes that, since the others in the city are as uneducated as he is, there is no need to prepare and to learn so as to compete with them: "for I know well that, with my nature, I will very greatly surpass them" (119b1-c1). The weight of the refutations no longer presses on his thoughts, and the sense of self-sufficiency and grandeur they had called into question have come rushing back. Only now, he has some *grounds* for believing that his natural gifts will propel him to great political heights. Alcibiades' disappointing failure to seek a Socratic education may not, therefore, by the worst of Socrates' problems at present. The one thing that stood between Alcibiades and his pursuit of the vision Socrates had presented in his opening speeches was the suggestion that such a vision could not be realized without Socrates' help. But now that safeguard is gone, and Socrates must attempt to curb some of the more dangerous desires he inflamed at the dialogue's opening.

Alcibiades' failure here marks the midpoint of the dialogue and its most significant pivot. In the section that follows, there are indications that Socrates is starting over with Alcibiades, albeit with some important changes in his intention. But that only prompts us to ask yet again: What were Socrates intentions to begin with? If Alcibiades has failed a Socratic test, what was Socrates hoping to achieve had he passed? Again, answers to these questions, prompted by the exhortation, are indicated in the exhortation itself. Let us therefore turn back to the exhortation with an eye to discovering Socrates' philosophic project.

In the course of the exhortation, Socrates divides the non-knowers into two classes: those who are aware of their ignorance, and those who are not. He does not do likewise for the knowers (117e9-118a3). Why not? Because one cannot be ignorant of the fact that one knows something – if one knows *x*, one *knows* that one knows *x*. To merely opine that one knows *x* fails to meet the standard of knowledge. Knowledge implies *certainty*. But to assert this is to raise an immediate difficulty: how is certainty to be achieved? If, as Socrates says, those who err do so because they falsely suppose that they know what they are doing, it would seem that we should precede all action by *confirming* that our knowledge of what we are doing is genuine. But how can this be achieved if professed certainty that one has knowledge is precisely what dooms the one who errs? Socrates provides a method for recognizing ignorance: when one's opinion wanders, it is a sign that one supposes one knows something of which one is ignorant. Incidentally, knowledge of ignorance thus comes to light as a special kind of knowledge; perhaps no knowledge is quite so solid as the knowledge that one does not know

something. But as for opinions that do *not* wander, what can we say about them? Might they not just as easily be persistent delusions as knowledge?

There are some suggestions within the exhortation as to how we might better confirm our knowledge. Possessors of the arts (*technai*) – cooks and pilots are Socrates' examples (117c2-d3) – seem to have a strong claim to knowledge, for they are able consistently to bring about the same good product, effect, or state of affairs. The power of this claim to knowledge is not to be underemphasized. Modern experimental science is founded upon the idea that one has learned something about a phenomenon if one can predict and reproduce it. There is thus an important kinship between the knowledge manifest in modern technology and the Greek idea of *technē* from which it derives its name. But, there are some kinds of knowledge that are not apparently obtained by the mastery of an art. Socrates' first questions in the exhortation are whether Alcibiades' opinions change regarding the number of eyes and hands he has (116e7-10). These represent a kind of self-knowledge, but more importantly, they refer to knowledge ascertained by the senses: what does not *appear* to change, especially when examined from different angles and in different ways, is understood to be fixed and known. One could, of course, raise objections to the certainty of such knowledge, just as one could raise doubts about the knowledge presumed by *technē*, but it cannot be denied that these kinds of knowledge are the nearest things to certainty of which we have experience.

But what about knowledge that can be ascertained neither through art, nor by the senses? The most striking question posed by Socrates to Alcibiades in the exhortation provides a crucial example: "Do you know of any way you will ascend into the heaven?"

(117b5). This is a question about the nature of the human soul and its place in the cosmos. Its answer is deeply unclear, and yet its significance – whether this earthly life is the only one for which the human soul is destined – is felt by every human being. Self-knowledge of the body is relatively easy; how are we to obtain knowledge, as elusive as it is necessary, of the human soul? And what of Socrates himself? The *Alcibiades* marks the beginning within Plato's dialogues of Socrates' mature philosophic career. It is the first of many conversations Plato presents us in which Socrates engages young interlocutors in dialectical investigations of moral and political questions. How are these conversations meant to help Socrates as a philosopher? How can they help him to find or confirm knowledge about the most important questions?

In the course of his investigation of Pericles' wisdom, we noted a statement Socrates made on the very question of confirming knowledge: "it is a beautiful proof that the knowers know whenever they are able to produce another knower" (118d6-8). In the context of our present discussion, this statement unexpectedly takes on a new meaning. For while it is true that Pericles can point to no one whom he has made wise, Socrates himself, at the time of the *Alcibiades*, would seem to be open to the same criticism. If Socrates, as a philosopher, requires proof of his wisdom, perhaps he hopes to provide such proof by finding a student who is able and willing to follow him along the path that leads up and out of the cave, to confirm for himself the conclusions of Socratic philosophy, or else to challenge and refine them. Indoctrination will not do: to produce a believer is not to produce a knower. This helps us to understand why Socrates would not

with greater clarity explain to Alcibiades the paradox of the noble. Socrates hoped to make Alcibiades wise.

This may also help us to answer a question about the exhortation: did Socrates really need to rescind his promise to be indispensible to the fulfillment of Alcibiades' ambitions by pointing out that none of the other Athenians were wise? It would seem that Alcibiades might well have been ready to turn to him as a teacher despite the fact that he had not proven himself to be the only one available. After all, it was Socrates who showed Alcibiades his lack – would it not be natural for Alcibiades to assume that Socrates might be able to supply what he needed? Socrates *wanted* to test Alcibiades in the way he did. By effectively rescinding his original promise, Socrates was able to see whether the import of the refutations, as illuminated by the exhortation, had properly set in for Alcibiades. Socrates' hope was that Alcibiades' extraordinary ambition could be shown at bottom to be dependent on an unexamined and confused understanding of justice and the noble, so that the exposure of the confusion would undermine and redirect the desire. He tried to show Alcibiades that happiness would be unattainable without knowledge of justice, the noble, the good, and the advantageous, with the thought that Alcibiades' ambition for political power and fame could not persist if it was uncertain to provide perfect happiness. In short, he wanted to show Alcibiades that what he most desires is not to be found in politics, but in philosophy. Instead, Alcibiades shrugs off what the refutations had revealed as soon as he notes their apparent irrelevance to the shining but unexamined life he wishes to lead.

Alcibiades has let Socrates down. His desire for power, honor, and fame had too great a life of its own, and his concern for the problems Socrates brought to light was too weak in comparison. Yet, in part for reasons to which we have already alluded, the dialogue does not end here, and Socrates' relationship with Alcibiades is only now beginning. Socrates' foresight may be keen enough already to see that Alcibiades will not become wise – but is there still something Socrates can gain from continuing to associate and converse with him? Or does Socrates still hold out some hope that Alcibiades may become truly philosophic? We shall have to turn to the second half of the dialogue with these questions in mind. But whether Socrates knows it at this moment or not, he will have to move on in his search for a philosophic student, and it may not be until he has found such a student that he will be able to furnish the most "beautiful proof" of his wisdom by sharing it as fully as is possible. It is our great fortune that he did eventually find such a student. For our proof of Socrates' wisdom is the work of Plato, and it is a beautiful proof indeed.

Part Three

I. Speech (119c2-124b6)

The last and longest speech of the *Alcibidaes* is preceded by a brief exchange. Just as the dialogue's opening speech was a necessary preparation for the one that immediately followed, the present conversation, following Alcibiades' failure to heed the Socratic exhortation, is a necessary preparation for Socrates' final speech. This preparation is necessary because Alcibiades has returned to his conviction that he needs nothing beyond what his nature has provided him – he must once again become open to the possibility that Socrates has something invaluable to impart. There are therefore several indications in this section that Socrates is somehow recapitulating the dialogue's opening. But the echoes of Socrates' first speech are mixed with indications that his approach and disposition have changed. A case in point is that Socrates' *eros* now reemerges as a theme, but in a much less hopeful light. Socrates' first response to Alcibiades' rejection of Socratic education is to bemoan how "unworthy" this rejection is of Alcibiades' "looks" and of his other qualities; when Alcibiades asks what he means, Socrates laments "I am vexed with you and with my love" (119c4-5). We might recall that, in Socrates' opening speeches, he claimed that he "would long ago have abandoned [his] love" if he had seen that Alcibiades was content to go through life with nothing more than his beauty, family, city, and wealth (104e6-8). Another important theme that suddenly reappears here is that of Alcibiades' *worthiness*.[2] But, whereas Socrates'

[2] The word for "worthy" (*axios*) and its cognates appear a total of fourteen times in the *Alcibiades*: four times in Socrates' opening speech (105b2, c5, e1, e3), six times in the present exchange (119c2, c7, d1, e1, e3, e5), and four times in the upcoming speech (121d3, 123b4, c6, d3).

opening speeches flattered Alcibiades in order to elevate his sense of worth, Socrates now adopts a tone of trenchant sarcasm in order to shame Alcibiades with the suggestion that he is incapable of accomplishing anything truly worthy.

Socrates accomplishes this by insisting that Alcibiades has fallen short of expectations in deeming it worthy to compete "against the human beings here." Then, when Alcibiades repeatedly asks him to explain what he means, Socrates coyly avoids clarification, responding with an infuriating combination of metaphor and sarcasm, e.g., "It's certainly worthy of you to be content if you are better than your soldiers, but not to look toward the leaders of your opponents to see whether you've become better than them, examining and training with an view to them" (119c7-e8). The effect of this is to stir a mounting anxiety in Alcibiades, a fear that he has hubristically overlooked the crucial source of opposition to the fulfillment of his ambition – and therefore, that he has prematurely rejected the Socratic education. Finally, Socrates reveals the identities of Alcibiades' "true enemies." As Alcibiades admits with growing concern, his contest will in fact be against the Lacedaemonian and Persian kings if he is to lead the Athenians, since Athens is often at war against Sparta and Persia. Socrates gets Alcibiades to see that it will not be enough simply to win political victories within Athens. If his career is to live up to the splendid vision he has of it, Alcibiades must come to be known not merely as the leader of Athens, but as the one who led her to ever-greater glory, and this means military victory. Of course, Alcibiades assumed from early on that his leadership would consist in good military counsel. But Socrates failed in the first half of the dialogue to secure Alcibiades' conviction that good counsel would be difficult to provide,

since Athens came to light as empty of worthy opponents. Hence, Socrates must conjure these more distant and exotic enemies in order to restore the notion that Alcibiades will need Socrates' help.

Socrates' emphasis on the need for Alcibiades to be a good leader and not just a successful politician ushers in one of the major themes of the dialogue's second half: Alcibiades' desire to be a benefactor of the Athenians. We can already detect in Socrates' sarcasm an emphasis on the shamefulness of being a slavish, corrupt, or ineffective leader. Consider, for instance, his mocking suggestion that Alcibiades ought to take after politicians such as "Medias the quail-striker,"[3] who enter politics in order "to flatter the city but not to rule it" (120a9-b5). Socrates plays on Alcibiades' disdain of flattery, a sentiment related to his naïve ignorance of the need for rhetoric. But this means that Socrates' will now pull sharply back from the quiet indications of the need for rhetoric that dotted the first half of the dialogue. In this connection, his image of Alcibiades piloting the trireme into battle would seem to be a final reminder of a problem that has not been solved (119d4-e3). His says that Alcibiades must not focus on overcoming his fellow sailors (citizens), but rather on defeating his "true enemies," the pilots (kings) of the other ships (cities). But Socrates also points to the difficulty that this requires prevailing over and "looking down upon" his fellow sailors to such a degree that they do not consider competing with him, and instead join him in battle. Yet a warship is no democracy. In a democracy, there are always rivals eager to compete for the highest

[3] Quail striking was a sport that pitted man against quail. The object was to force a quail out of a small circular area by flicking it on the head (see Denyer, 168).

honors. It is an ill-advised democratic statesman who flatly refuses to flatter the demos, who simply insists on his superiority. Thucydides helps us to see that Alcibiades may never have learned the extent to which democratic rhetoric requires a certain pandering for the sake of one's own well being (cf. 6.16-18 with 6.28.2 and 6.60.1).

Socrates has revealed that Alcibiades' true rivals are kings of Sparta and Persia. One can imagine Alcibiades' head spinning with shame, embarrassment, and fear as Socrates brings forth from the shadows the enemies he had been concealing, men who cannot be won over by Alcibiades' charm, who wish to dominate him and his fellow citizens, against whom it will be his duty to fight in defense of his fatherland, and whom he will have to overcome if his grandest ambitions are to be fulfilled. But Alcibiades is not yet entirely persuaded: will not these enemies be as lacking in Socratic wisdom as the Athenians? Will Alcibiades' impressive natural gifts, therefore, not still be enough, even without Socratic education, to win him the glory for which he believes he is destined (120c3-5)? Socrates' remarkable two-part response prepares us for his longest speech. First, Socrates obtains Alcibiades' agreement that he is better off believing his enemies to be formidable, for he would then take greater care to improve himself (120c9-d8). Second, Socrates says he will show "from the likely things" that, after all, Alcibiades is simply *wrong* to believe that he is superior to his true enemies: the Persian and Spartan kings, descended as they are from the most distinguished lineages, and brought up with the finest educations, are most likely to have become "perfect with respect to virtue" (120d9-e5). This is the first appearance of the word for virtue (*aretē*) in the dialogue. The procedure of Socrates' speech, then, will be to show how greatly inferior are

Alcibiades' family and rearing to those of his true rivals, and thus how sorely lacking in virtue he is. But note what is implied by the two parts of Socrates' reply when taken together. Socrates all but proclaims that he will be providing Alcibiades with a salutary falsehood, an exaggerated belief in the might of his rivals that will compel him to take greater care over his own virtue. This is the first clear sign that Socrates has changed course. Socrates no longer apparently hopes for Alcibiades to become wise. We can say that he still wishes to educate Alcibiades, but it is a different sort of education. It is a moral education, but not a philosophic one. It is a beneficial education but, we are entitled to suspect, not the most beneficial education Socrates has to offer. Its benefit to Socrates remains a mystery.

Socrates' clearest purpose in this speech is to bring Alcibiades to shame. But whereas his previous speech scolded Alcibiades primarily for an *intellectual* failing, viz., for rejecting an argument on childish grounds, this speech will scold him for his hubristic and overweening confidence. Socrates will accomplish this, as he explains, by "setting our things against theirs," i.e., by comparing that which Socrates and Alcibiades can claim as Athenians to that which belongs to the Spartan and Persian kings. Beginning with a comparison of families, Socrates has Alcibiades consider that both the Spartan and Persian kings trace their ancestries directly to Zeus through Perseus, by way of Heracles and Achaemenes respectively. Alcibiades retorts immediately that he too is descended from Zeus, through Ajax's son Eurysakes (120e6-121a2). It is in response to this claim that Socrates delivers the dialogue's longest speech. The purpose of the speech is to

dissuade Alcibiades of his belief that he is blessed with divine favor, to make him see that he is not himself divine, but a mere mortal staring up at his foes as at gods.

The first portion of the speech is dedicated to showing Alcibiades what true divine favor looks like (121a3-c4). Socrates notes that the Persian and Spartan kings are descended from Zeus in unbroken successions of kings, while Socrates and Alcibiades are private men, as were their fathers. As for Alcibiades' own claim to divine ancestry, Socrates casts doubt upon it by juxtaposing it with a fanciful divine genealogy of his own. Moreover, Socrates notes how great the kingdoms of Alcibiades' true rivals are: the Spartan kings rule over Argos and Lacedaemon, and the Great Kings rule not only Persia, but often the whole of Asia; not even the noblest of Alcibiades' ancestors possessed land that would be anything but laughable by comparison. From family and land, Socrates turns to the honor in which the foreign kings are held by their peoples. Their queens are guarded – by the ephors in Sparta, and by fear alone in Persia – so that there is no doubt as to the purity of the royal bloodlines; Socrates graciously leaves the insinuation about Alcibiades' birth unspoken. All of this serves to undermine Alcibiades' confidence in his own greatness. We might note that Socrates does not hesitate to embellish in order to further this effect. For example, the heredity of the Persian monarchy was broken in the year 522 (a fact known to Plato – see *Laws* 695c). And, while Alcibiades cannot confirm the veracity of all of Socrates' claims regarding these remote figures, he *can* be made to see the distinct lack of evidence suggesting that the gods mean to bestow special favor upon *him*. Or rather, Socrates makes the evidence upon which Alcibiades had already been relying, consciously or not, seem much more ambiguous than it had before.

The next portion of the speech has much the same quality as the first, tracing the birth and upbringing of a Persian crown prince so as to show how splendid are the honors and attention he receives, and thereby to make Alcibiades' own life seem mundane by comparison (121c4-122b8). The prince's birthday is celebrated as a holiday "for the rest of time"; as an infant, he is tended by the king's best eunuchs, who are themselves held "in great honor" for straightening the infant prince's limbs so as "to contrive that he will be most beautiful." By comparison, "the neighbors hardly notice" when Athenians like Alcibiades and Socrates are born, and as an infant, Alcibiades was tended "by a woman nurse of little worth." But as Socrates continues his narration of the rearing of the Persian prince, a new and important element enters his account. For the education of the prince is an education in virtue. The prince has four expert "royal tutors," one for each of the classical cardinal virtues, and Socrates briefly describes the prince's education in each one. The most striking thing to note about these descriptions is that they are utterly devoid of the paradoxes that riddled the earlier discussions of justice, courage, and the noble. No mention is made of "death and wounds" with respect to courage – it is reduced simply to fearlessness. No mention is made of military counsel with respect to justice – it is reduced simply to honesty. Some preparation for political rule seems to be provided through the education in moderation and wisdom. But in the former case (as in the case of courage), the emphasis is on escaping slavishness and becoming truly *free*. The education in wisdom is said to include "the kingly things," but the greater emphasis is on Persian religion: the prince learns, from the wisest Persian in the bloom of youth, to serve the gods.

Of course, this account too contributes to making Alcibiades feel insignificant – his own tutor is "that one of [Pericles'] slaves most useless on account of age, Zopyrus the Thracian." But more importantly, it introduces the possibility of escape from that insignificance through education in virtue, especially since Socrates notes that Alcibiades' only hope for such an education is, "if someone happens to be [his] lover." Alcibiades is thus prepared to conclude that he must turn to Socrates as a teacher of virtue if he is to compete with his true rivals. Moreover, the image of virtue that is presented here is of a seamless perfection of soul: perfect freedom, total self-mastery, and divine favor. Socrates gives Alcibiades the impression that the virtuous life is without admixture of evil – we can say that it begins to resemble the peak of Alcibiades' own ambition. Such a life is accomplished through preparation and training in the case of moderation and courage, and through some learning in the case of wisdom and justice. Socrates' suggestion that piety and honesty are required for a life of untainted freedom and rule (ironic given the mendacity of Socrates' presentation) is representative of the more conventional civic and moral direction of the education he now wishes to give Alcibiades: the virtuous are rewarded with happiness.

The section of the speech on education makes no mention of the Spartan kings. Perhaps Socrates thought it would be too difficult artfully to distort the Spartan education as he did the Persian, since Alcibiades is more likely to have knowledge of Spartan customs. But the Spartans and their legendary virtue have their place in Socrates' speech. For, despite the godly aura with which Socrates was able to surround virtue in his description of the Persian education, the Great King is, after all, a despot. Holding up

these kings as Alcibiades' imagined enemies helps to foster some humility in him, but Socrates must be careful lest those same enemies become models for emulation in the wrong respects. The passage that follows the education section consists of two lists enumerating the ways in which Alcibiades will find himself eclipsed by his rivals:

> If you wish to focus on (1) wealth, (2) luxuries, (3) clothing and trailing robes, (4) perfumed unguents, and (5) retinues of multitudes of servants and the other Persian refinement, you would be ashamed for yourself if you perceived how far you fall short of them. But if you would wish in turn to focus on the (1) moderation and orderliness, (2) fortitude, (3) good temper, (4) high-mindedness, (5) discipline, (6) courage, (7) endurance, (8) love of toil, (9) love of victory, and (10) love of honor of the Lacedaemonians , you would believe yourself to be a child in each of these things. (122b8-d1)[4]

Alcibiades' reaction to learning of his inferiority in these respects, as described by Socrates, suggests that these two lists represent ways of life to which Alcibiades is attracted. In other words, the lists suggest two directions in which Alcibiades' ambition might tend.

First, Alcibiades' ambition might drive him to seek money and power. Or rather, if we take the list as a kind of progression, it seems that the desire for wealth in an ambitious soul, especially once that desire has been gratified, may lead to the development of ever vainer and more hedonistic tastes. At the extreme of this list is the possession of multitudes of servants; the ambitious man may come to enjoy and desire greater and greater power simply for the delight in its exercise. At the center of the list is ostentatious adornment. Perhaps the most intoxicating aspect of wealth for Alcibiades in particular is the way it allows him to shine and be admired, to be honored for his

[4] The numbering is not in the original. I have numbered separately whatever Socrates separates with "*kai*," except where he also uses *te* (numbers 3 and 5 in the first list, and number 1 in the second).

magnificence. If this list of Persian possessions partly represents the allure of tyranny for Alcibiades – which would accord with its being associated with the Great King – then we note that tyranny appeals to the love of honor, but provides honor bought and not earned.

Socrates makes the second list twice as long as the first, which suggests that he wants Alcibiades to give it more attention. Unlike the first, this is a list of qualities of soul and not of possessions. It can be broken into two groups of five, each headed by a cardinal virtue: the first by moderation, and the second by courage. We learned from the last refutation that courage or manliness is the most important virtue to Alcibiades. If his ambition will carry him to an emulation of the Spartans, it will be because of his attraction to manliness, his love of victory and of honor. If he fails, it may be because of his lack of what is given under the heading of moderation. Altogether, this list of Spartan virtues, like the list of Persian refinements, appeals to a genuine strain of Alcibiades' ambition, and to his love of honor. Indeed, it mentions love of honor explicitly, for it is the love of this sort of honor that Socrates hopes to nurture in Alcibiades: honor earned through toil and hard-won victory, through virtuous self-control and high-mindedness.

These lists appear to indicate that Socrates considers Alcibiades to be at a kind of crossroads. His ambition and love of honor could take him in either of two directions, and Socrates appears determined to guide him toward virtue as much as possible. Now, one might object on the basis of Socrates' first speech that the danger of Alcibiades being seduced by wealth and luxury ought to be minimal. For in laying out the qualities and possessions on which Alcibiades prides himself (all of which, incidentally, have been addressed in the present speech), Socrates had supposed that wealth was the least of them

(104b8-c1). However, the majority of the remainder of this longest speech is devoted to a discussion of wealth. If Socrates thought that money was relatively unimportant to Alcibiades at the outset, he now has come to think that his attempt to educate Alcibiades will require that he pay significant attention to the question of wealth – or rather, what wealth represents: the desire to be honored for one's power, opulence, and magnificence. This comparison of Socrates' relative emphasis on wealth in these first and last speeches sheds light on the change that has taken place between them. Socrates is now more concerned with the danger of Alcibiades' ambition becoming tyrannical.

Socrates' treatment of wealth appears to function much like the rest of the speech (122d1-123c3). Socrates portrays the riches of the Spartan and Persian kings as being so vast as to make Alcibiades' own wealth appear meaningless. That is, to whatever extent Alcibiades' wealth, like his beauty and his family, give him the impression that he is special and destined for greatness, Socrates' account will help to deflate that impression. But clearly that is not quite enough, for while Alcibiades cannot pursue an increase in his beauty or in the greatness of his family so as to remedy his inferiority in those respects, it is difficult to see how recognition of his relative poverty would thwart his attempt to pursue greater wealth. In fact, one could imagine that it would have just the opposite effect.

Socrates therefore tinges his description of Spartan and Persian wealth with insinuations that there is something weak and especially effeminate about the love and pursuit of it. So, for example, Socrates notices that the Spartans receive payment from other cities, but that the gold and silver they receive never leaves the city – just as

Aesop's fox notices that the footprints lead into the lion's cave but not out. But the secrecy with which the Spartans hoard this money reveals something shameful about it. Their love of wealth represents a decline from the pure military virtue for which they are famous. The lion in Aesop's fable has taken to luring animals into his cave under false pretenses, as he has grown too old to hunt. The Spartan love of wealth represents their decline from the manliness of force to the dishonorable deceit of fraud. As for the wealth of the Persian king, which truly does dwarf that of any Athenian, Socrates this time omits any mention of luxuries, slaves, or perfumes, and instead focuses on the expanse of land the king controls. But what he says about that land is that its regions are named after parts of the queen's wardrobe, since the wealth collected from one region would provide for her girdles, another her veils, and so on. In this way, Socrates makes the vast wealth of the Great King seem almost silly on account of the unserious end to which it is a means. Here too, Socrates makes the pursuit of wealth seem distinctly effeminate, and quietly suggests that wealth and luxury are frivolous and unworthy of a real man.

It is fitting, then, that in the remainder of the speech, Socrates describes what he imagines would be the bemused reactions of the Persian and Spartan *queens* upon learning that Alcibiades intends to compete against their sons (123c3-124a7). Socrates has Amestris, mother of Artaxerxes, scoff at the meagerness of the wardrobe of Alcibiades' mother, baffled to think the son of such a paltry woman would conceive of challenging her own son. But then Socrates has her begin to make suggestions similar to the ones Socrates himself had been making. She suggests that Alcibiades' only hopes are taking care (*epimeleia*) and wisdom, and hence she is only more flabbergasted to learn

that Alcibiades is barely twenty years old, totally uneducated, and will not even heed his lover's advice to learn, to take care of himself, and to train before challenging the king. She views the very idea that Alcibiades could consider his nature sufficient for the task as insane, just as the Spartan queen Lampido, according to Socrates, would wonder at such a poorly brought up lad thinking to challenge her son. Socrates has thus conjured up witnesses to confirm his assessment: Alcibiades desperately needs to train and learn if he is to have any chance of political success. That these mocking witnesses are women pushes Alcibiades to follow the manlier strain of his ambition, that part of him which wishes to be honored not for his wealth or power, but for his virtue.

Concluding his speech, Socrates implores Alcibiades:

> blessed one, obeying me and the inscription at Delphi, know thyself, that these are our rivals (not those you suppose) of whom we won't overcome a single one by anything other than taking care and art. If you fall short of them, you'll also fall short of becoming a name among the Greeks and the barbarians, which you seem to me to love as no one else [loves] any other thing. (124a7-b6)

As he has throughout the speech, Socrates allies himself with Alcibiades with the use of the first person plural. As much as he has been putting Alcibiades to shame by comparing him to the Persian and Spartan kings, he has taken care to present himself as a teacher and lover. In this capacity, he counsels Alcibiades to have the self-awareness to recognize who his true rivals are. Socrates needs Alcibiades to see that his ambition points out far beyond Athens, or that his contest is not "against the human beings here." If Socrates cannot harness Alcibiades' tremendous love of honor, described here as an erotic love of renown, then Socrates will have no hold over Alcibiades, no opportunity to convince him of the importance of virtue. Alcibiades' ambition will be dangerously

unfettered. But Socrates' invocation of the Delphic inscription reminds us that the education of Alcibiades is not all that is at stake for Socrates in this association (cf. *Phaedrus* 229c6-230a7); somehow, his own pursuit of self-knowledge through Alcibiades continues.

II. Refutation (124b7-127d8)

Socrates' desire to seek some education for himself through his association with Alcibiades is stated nowhere more clearly than in the passage immediately following his last and longest speech. He now says that he, like Alcibiades, needs an education in order to become "best" (124b7-c3). Socrates speaks as though the two of them are embarking on a common enterprise to take the care of which "all human beings" are in need (124d2-3). But this is claim is ironic: we have suggested, and will yet confirm, that Socrates has turned away from the project which most involves a shared education for him and Alcibiades, i.e., in which Socrates' wisdom is proved by Alcibiades' apprehension of it. Socrates is pursuing an education for himself, but that education will likely diverge sharply from the education with which he will provide Alcibiades. Now, the only way in which Socrates explicitly claims to differ from or surpass (*diapherō*) Alcibiades is that his "guardian is better and wiser than [Alcibiades' guardian] Pericles." Socrates' guardian, he explains, is "a god, Alcibiades, the very one who did not allow me to converse with you before today, and trusting in whom I say that you will have fame through no one else but me" (124b5-10). Socrates' claim to have access to this god amounts to a claim to have access to some divine wisdom, which appears to govern

especially Socrates' own erotic longing. It is this wisdom which has allowed Socrates to seek the fulfillment of certain hopes through Alcibiades, and thus the wisdom itself must bear somehow on the character of those hopes. If we are meant to understand that the difference between the educations Socrates and Alcibiades will obtain from their association is represented by Socrates' god, then we can suggest that Socrates' education will illuminate divinity, eros, and hope in a way that Alcibiades' will not. But if this is still too speculative, we can limit ourselves to the observation that Socrates' mention of his god picks up a thread that he had left off near the beginning of the dialogue: he here renews his effort to give himself an aura of the divine or uncanny. Moreover, he reminds Alcibiades that the success or failure of his education is not up to Socrates himself, but to a god who, for all we know, might rescind his sanction of Socrates' and Alcibiades' relationship at any time.

To understand the purpose of the final refutation, however, we would need to understand the project Socrates has in mind. One might begin by suggesting that the goal of this refutation is no different than that of the previous ones: Socrates wants to make Alcibiades see that he lacks knowledge necessary for the fulfillment of his political ambitions. Indeed, the coming refutation fits that bill even better than the others. For Socrates' earlier refutations purportedly established that Alcibiades lacked knowledge of justice, but Alcibiades was in every case able to turn a blind eye to the suggestion that he was therefore unready for politics. In this final refutation, however, Socrates will show Alcibiades that he has given stunningly little thought to what the purpose of political rule should be at all. Alcibiades will be unable to deny the import of *this* ignorance to his

desire to rule, and he will have to turn to Socrates for education. But there is a difficulty with this explanation of the purpose of the final refutation: it would seem that Socrates' speech has already prompted Alcibiades to turn to Socrates for education. The refutation would seem to be superfluous – that is, until we recall that Socrates has become concerned about the dangerous direction in which Alcibiades' ambition might lead him. Hence, the refutation is not so much for the sake of turning Alcibiades *toward* Socratic education, as it is for the sake of turning him temporarily *away* from political life. This requires a final clarification. Socrates' earlier refutations also had the aim of making Alcibiades suspend his entry into politics, but that was then to be accomplished by showing him that there was a problem in determining how happiness itself was to be achieved. Political life would therefore have to be subordinated to a philosophical investigation of how one ought to live, which might or might not end by vindicating the political life. In that respect, this final refutation does *not* succeed where the earlier ones failed, or even attempt to do so. For Alcibiades is never again prompted to question the very goodness of political success, but only his ability to attain it.

The structure of this refutation differs somewhat from the previous ones. Rather than begin with a claim that is to be refuted – that Alcibiades knows the just and unjust things, or that the just is sometimes disadvantageous – Socrates presses Alcibiades, through an extended dialectical exchange, to say what the virtue is that he wishes to obtain, and what that virtue will accomplish for him politically. Alcibiades' answers to this Socratic questioning are almost comical in their vagueness; it seems he has thought very little about the practical reality of ruling and how he wishes to go about it. As is his

wont, Socrates demonstrates to Alcibiades the imprecision of his answers by suggesting a number of valid but incorrect interpretations of them – the familiar, "did you mean farmers, shoemakers, etc.?" – until Alcibiades provides some specification. Abstracting from those intervening exchanges for the time being, we can trace the dialectical path up to Alcibiades' key claim in a series of questions and answers (124d9-126c3).

Table 1: Deconstruction of Alcibiades' domestic political hopes

Socrates	**Alcibiades**
1. With respect to what virtue do we wish to become "best?"	1. That of good men.
2. Good at what?	2. At the practice of affairs.
3. The affairs practiced by whom?	3. The noble and good Athenians.
4. Which ones do you say are good?	4. Those who have power to rule in the city.
5. Whom do they rule?	5. Those doing business with and making use of each other, as we do in living in cities
6. Which human beings who make use of human beings do you mean?	6. Those who share in common in a regime and do business with one another.
7. What do you call a science of sharing in common in a regime?	7. Good counsel.
8. Good counsel in what?	8. In better managing and preserving the city.
9. When what is present and what absent does a city come to be better and to be better tended and managed?	**9. When there comes to be friendship of the people for each other, and when hatred and factional strife are absent.**

This last claim, effectively that Alcibiades wishes to bring friendship to Athens and banish hatred and faction, becomes the crucial one for the refutation. Socrates will persuade Alcibiades that there are serious problems with this political vision, and thus that he does not even know to what end he should direct his political career. But before turning to that refutation, let us briefly consider the winding path that brings us to it.

Alcibiades' first three answers are notably underwhelming. His answers lack any substance; he can hardly describe what it is that he actually wants to *do* as a statesman. The third response is somewhat more revealing than the first two: he wants to take up the business of the "noble and good" men (*kaloi kagathoi*); that is, of the leisured, aristocratic class of Athenian gentlemen, dedicated to political activity and civic virtue, including military service. It is no coincidence that Alcibiades' admiration for these men comes out in the wake of the speech in which Socrates extolled virtue. But Socrates makes prudence or practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) the defining characteristic of the *kaloi kagathoi*, and thus quickly shifts all of the emphasis on to the "good" and off of the "noble" (125a3-b8). The question becomes, "what are they good *at*?" as opposed, for example, to "whom are they good *for*?" It is worth noting that there are no mentions of the *kalos kagathos* anywhere before or after this point in the *Alcibiades*. Moreover, with the barely admissible exception of a few lines at the conclusion of the dialogue (135b7-c1), the noble as such is never again taken up as the object of Socrates' and Alcibiades' examination. By no means will Socrates attempt to reprise the discussion of the noble and the good that formed the substance of the dialogue's most important refutation. Alcibiades' enduring confusion concerning those matters can be said to pervade his

responses throughout this refutation, but Socrates does nothing to bring that fact to his attention.

Socrates does not ask for whom Alcibiades will be good, but he does ask whom he will rule. Alcibiades denies that he has in mind to rule those who are sick, sailing, or farming (125b14-19). Of course, he *will* have to rule over such people; Alcibiades means that he will not rule them in their capacities as invalids, sailors, and farmers. He will rule them as *citizens*, and this seems to be a much more exalted thing. But why is that so? Socrates is beginning to coax out of Alcibiades what it is about political life that he finds so alluring – not in the sense of the power or fame that will accrue to him, but rather of the reason for which the statesman is *deserving* of those great goods. He is forcing Alcibiades to try put into words what it is about political rule that is so splendid and worthy, but the question of who is ruled causes some difficulty, since the ruled are after all nothing more than the collection of simple, unimpressive, ordinary people who happen to inhabit the city. Rule over horses, Alcibiades recognizes, is nothing grand (125b10-11). So what is it about human beings living together in a political community that makes the office that presides over them so prestigious? Alcibiades' first guess seems to fall well short of the mark: he identifies the utilitarian economic purpose of the political community, the way in which people "make use of" each other in business, i.e., the division of labor. Certainly, this is one of the most important functions and origins of political life. But Alcibiades is made to see that it does not live up to what he has in mind, as Socrates points out that the ship's pilot and the chorus director each rule over

groups of people, organized into classes and ranks according to their tasks, who "make use of one another" by working together toward a common goal (125c6-d6).

Alcibiades sees that rule over partnerships is not enough – he reformulates his response to say that the ruled are those "sharing in common (*koinōnountōn*) in a regime." Thus, Alcibiades turns away from the hierarchical division of labor, and conceives of the city as a partnership represented by the "regime" (*politeia*). Now, if this succeeds in doing greater justice to the esteem in which Alcibiades holds the political things, it is likely only because he makes use of the word for "politics." But vague as it is, his present formulation suits Socrates' purpose. For "sharing in common in the regime" indicates that the citizens *qua* citizens get to share in some important good not reducible to mere economic advantage, that grand common good to which political life would seem to be directed. Surely, Alcibiades will have to know at least what this good *is* if he is to become a successful statesman. We have thus returned to the question of what it is in which Alcibiades will counsel the Athenians – but now the question is not (except indirectly) what will earn him great honors, but what will most fully bring about the flourishing of the city. Accordingly, Alcibiades does not speak of war and peace, which seem in the present light too narrowly concerned either with the preservation of the city or with Alcibiades' own glory, but rather of the *friendship* he will bring to Athens. We may note that, in order to arrive at this notion of politics, Alcibiades had to abstract from the economic division of labor among the citizens. Only then could he articulate a notion of citizenship worthy of the name. But Socrates' analogy of the body to the city, in which he says that the former is well-managed when health is present and sickness

absent, is given a kind of twist when he repeats the analogy with eyes and ears in place of the body (126a5-b7). For this causes us to realize that the good management of a complex whole may require the good condition of its several parts, each with its own narrow tasks to perform, and therefore with its own standard of good condition. In coming to express what he takes to be the highest good of the political whole, Alcibiades was forced to lose sight of what is low but necessary within it. His political vision is therefore fundamentally utopian.

Socrates pushes Alcibiades to see this by having him define "friendship" as a kind of agreement or concord (*homonoia*). To some extent, this is surely what Alcibiades had in mind. Note that, when Alcibiades cited friendship as what needs to be present in a well-managed city, he cited *two* things as its opposite: hatred and factional strife. This additional specificity in Alcibiades' negative definition of the well-managed city suggests that the character of what he wants to eliminate in the city is clearer in his mind than what he wants to replace it. In this light, friendship among all the citizens looks rather like a naïve aspiration, but it is easy to see how such an aspiration could be produced or supported by the experience of civil strife. What distresses Alcibiades about the state of Athenian political affairs are its bitter partisan divisions. But even to state the alternative, that there should be "friendship" among the citizens, is to recognize that there is something fanciful about the hope of escaping such divisions. Politics has in every place and time – though perhaps especially in democracies – been characterized by disagreement, sometimes profound disagreement, on how the regime ought to be governed. Is there something in the nature of politics that precludes the alternative, a

regime in which no disagreement on this crucial question exists? Perhaps it is a vague awareness of this problem that strikes Alcibiades when Socrates begins to elaborate the notion of "concord" by likening it to agreement about numbers, measures, and weights. Political agreement among the rival factions in the city will not be so easy to obtain as agreement about these things. Hence, Alcibiades falls silent when Socrates asks him to name the art that will produce the kind of friendship he has in mind.

In an attempt to salvage the notion of friendship in the city, Alcibiades attempts to reformulate what he means, saying that by "friendship and concord" he means that which a mother and father have with their son, or a brother with his brother, or a wife with her husband (126e2-4). Family members do not promote each other's good or the good of the family for the sake of personal gain. Familial loyalty and devotion seem by their character to imply a belief that one's own good is indistinguishable from the good of one's family (cf. *Lysis* 207d-e). Hence the family comes to sight as more than the sum of its parts, for the common good that is shared by its devoted members is a good that cannot simply be understood as being composed of the individual goods of each. As a worthy object of devotion, something bigger than oneself, extending forward and backward in time beyond the reach of one's own life, the family can come to sight as a natural whole, a chorus to which one can add one's own voice in order to become a part of something more splendid and more beautiful than one ever could have accomplished alone. Devotion to the family supports the notion that the soul can transcend the narrow, physical concerns of the body, that there is a higher purpose for it to fulfill, through which it can make itself worthy of the great good it longs for and seeks. Alcibiades

senses that devotion to such a common good can provide such fulfillment, and more exaltedly still in the case of the city than of the family. Something like this is what he sees as the great good politics can provide, and it is in providing this good to Athens that he hopes to make himself worthy of the great honor he seeks.

But Socrates is able to show Alcibiades that this vision is something of an illusion by reminding him of the division of labor that fragments and disequilibrates the unity of the whole. His argument is strange: he points out that a husband will have knowledge his wife does not have ("manly understanding," such as the hoplite's art), and vice versa (the wife has knowledge of how to spin wool, a "womanly understanding"). But this, suggests Socrates, means that there will be no concord between them in these matters, and therefore no friendship (127a9-11). Now, Alcibiades' response to this suggestion, "it appears not," is hardly emphatic (127a13). He senses that there is something lacking in this account, and understandably so, since it does not seem that husbands and wives "doing their own things" in the way described will stop them from holding each other dear (127a14-b4). And yet, Alcibiades raises no objection, for he is aware that the love between a husband and wife is no argument for the possibility of political unity. As in the family, there will be division of labor in the city: there will be warriors and wage-earners, deserving and receiving greatly differing amounts of honor from the city, partaking to different degrees in manliness or courage, the virtue without which Alcibiades would not consider life worth living. There is no political art, no agreement to be brokered, that will make these disparate elements of society love each other like a family, and so Alcibiades knows that Socrates' point is sound. The only city that comes

close to achieving the effect Alcibiades describes is the city in speech of the *Republic* – so it is no wonder that Alcibiades cannot imagine a regime that can overcome the problem to which Socrates points.

But the peak of the refutation is still to come. For Socrates now notes that, not only is it not possible to overcome the division of labor in a city, it is not even desirable! Cities are well managed, agrees Alcibiades, when all within them "do their own things," i.e., when different people have different tasks and possess accordingly different knowledge – in fact, such are the cities that do "the just things" (127b5-c7). But this means that justice and friendship are mutually exclusive features of the city, for when there is justice, there is no concord; the differing ways of life and differing knowledge and opinions produced by each doing his or her own things make broad political agreement impossible. We note that Alcibiades agrees with Socrates' definition of the just things without hesitation, and that he simply assumes that justice is a great good for the city. Socrates, for his part, allows Alcibiades' claim to know the just things to go unexamined, in accordance with the character of the second half of the dialogue. Thus, Alcibiades cannot accept the incompatibility of justice and friendship – such a conclusion, it seems, can only indicate to him that his argument has been faulty. Alcibiades admits his ignorance in terms that recall the conclusion of the previous refutation: "But by the gods, Socrates, I don't myself know what I mean, but I'm afraid that my being in a most shameful state has long escaped my notice" (127d6-8). He is ashamed at the depth of his ignorance concerning the most basic political question: what is the purpose of the regime?

III. Exhortation (127d9-135e8)

Socrates responds to Alcibiades' lament with encouragement: he is at the right age, says Socrates, to perceive such ignorance; had he perceived it at fifty, it would have been difficult to care for himself appropriately (127d9-e3). It is tempting to take this as an indication that Socrates still has hopes for Alcibiades to turn to philosophy. For one would think that the greatest difficulty in recognizing one's ignorance late in life is the rigidity of long-standing opinions and beliefs. The advantage of Alcibiades' youth, then, would seem to be his malleability and openness to revising his opinions and beliefs, perhaps by submitting them to rigorous philosophic examination. But then again, we cannot know if this is what Socrates has in mind until we see more clearly *how* he is trying to shape or redirect Alcibiades' understanding. After all, the ignorance now in question is no longer ignorance of justice, but ignorance of a more directly practical political matter that is being considered within the horizon of conventional civic morality. Perhaps, then, Socrates is referring to a sub-philosophic care that Alcibiades can take, which would for its own reasons be difficult later in life. We must therefore turn to the dialogue's long final section, Socrates' closing exhortation to Alcibiades, with an eye to the lasting effect Socrates is hoping to have on the youth. Moreover, this exhortation, even more than the preceding ones, will lay out for the careful reader some features of the substance and method of Socrates' own examination.

Alcibiades reiterates his eagerness to learn what he must do, and Socrates' response reminds him that his success is in the hands of the god. Socrates thus maintains

a certain caution, apparently uncertain himself as to how Alcibiades' character and thinking will develop (127e4-8). Unlike the other exhortations, this one will not set out to persuade Alcibiades that he must turn to Socrates. That goal was effectively met by Socrates' last speech, and Alcibiades already is already willing to answer Socrates' questions for the sake of self-improvement. Instead, Socrates will now proceed to bring a number of new questions and considerations to Alcibiades' attention, beginning with the question of what it means for a human being to take care of oneself (127e9-128a3). The first distinction he makes in this regard concerns "taking care" in the abstract: he distinguishes between taking care of *x* and taking care of *x*'s things, i.e., that which belongs or pertains to *x*. Alcibiades has a hard time understanding this distinction, but finally accepts it once Socrates clarifies that one cares for something by means of an art which makes it better; but the art which makes the foot, hand, or body better (gymnastics) is different from the arts which make their things better (shoemaking, ring-making, and weaving). Socrates brings Alcibiades to see that, if they are going to take care of themselves, they must come to know what they are in precise distinction from the things that merely belong to them (128a4-129a1).

For the sake of learning how to care for oneself, then, the key question will become, "what is a human being?" Socrates takes up this puzzle first by reference to the Pythian inscription, "Know thyself," which he previously invoked at the conclusion of his last speech (129a2-4). Socrates thus suggests that the search for the self is mandated by the gods. Through a consideration of the act of conversing in which their own two "selves" are engaged, Socrates leads Alcibiades to the conclusion that the human self is

that which makes use of the body. The body is thus understood to be like a tool used by the human being, and therefore something distinct from the human being, just as an artisan is distinct from the tools he uses (129b1-e12). Socrates is preparing a dramatic demotion of the body: if the body is not the self, but only belongs to the self, then care for the body is not a part of care for the self (according to the first argument about "taking care"). We can begin to imagine the consequences of such a demotion for Alcibiades by recalling the importance of his physical beauty to the grand hopes he had developed.

Of course, the basis of this demotion is highly suspect. That care for *x* is strictly separate from care for what pertains to *x* is a dubious claim even on the basis of Socrates' examples. Surely shoes help to protect the feet, if not strictly to make them better; likewise, the ring beautifies the hand, and it is at least a question whether this counts as improving it. As these considerations show, Socrates' insistence that one must know *what* a thing is in order to make it better is somewhat misleading; the primary thing one would need to know is what it means to make it better, i.e., what its good is. We are reminded of Alcibiades' dialectical education near the beginning of the dialogue, which concerned the different meanings of "better" in different contexts, and laid the ground for the conclusion that the "better" in a key instance was the more just. A complete examination of care for a human being would require an investigation of the place of the just and the noble in the human good. Turning our attention to the dialogue's concluding section as a whole, the section that ostensibly examines how to care for oneself as a human being, we become aware of a stunning silence concerning what the good of a

human being is. That silence is emblematic of the radical incompleteness of the education Socrates is now providing Alcibiades.

We could also object to Socrates' paradoxical suggestion that the human being is separate from the human body. His argument was that the human being is what uses the body, and that user and used are distinct. But this seems to overlook the possibility that the human being is able to use itself, or that one part of it is able to use another. Now, Socrates seems to indicate his awareness of this problem when, after getting Alcibiades' agreement that what uses (or "rules") the body is nothing other than the soul, he reintroduces the possibility that body is or is a part of the human being, as though that possibility had not adequately been disqualified: "I suppose that no one would suppose anything but this … that the human being is one of three things … soul or body or both as the whole thing." But then, immediately disqualifying the latter two options on the basis of dubious inferences from earlier agreements, Socrates concludes: "Since a human being is neither body nor both [body and soul], I suppose what remains is either that it is nothing, or if it is something, that the human being happens to be nothing other than soul." Alcibiades appears to take this strange procedure to be a rigorous logical proof that the human being is the soul, but Socrates suggests that the examination has been "imprecise" but "fitting," and that it results in the beautiful (he does not say "correct") belief that the two of them are conversing "soul to soul" (130a1-d10).

Socrates has enumerated four possible answers to the question "what is a human being?": soul, body, both together, and nothing at all. He does this in such a way as to persuade Alcibiades that the human being is simply the soul, which exercises sovereign

rule over the body (129e10-130a3, 130d5-6). But Socrates' indication that the examination has been imprecise means that he does not himself consider the argument that has persuaded Alcibiades to be sufficient, and so each of the possibilities he mentions remains potentially valid. Socrates notes that the imprecision in the argument has resulted from their failure to take up a question that was earlier raised and abandoned: what is the self itself (*auto to auto*)? A self is a thing, something one can refer to as "it"; the "self itself" is of the common Socratic form, "the *x* itself," and therefore refers to that by virtue of which all selves can be called selves.[5] Now, how would knowledge of this help us to determine what, among the enumerated possibilities, a human being is? Perhaps there is a clue is in the enigmatic suggestion that the human being may in fact be "nothing." By raising this possibility, Socrates suggests that the "human being" may somehow be more illusion than reality, that it is not a self, that there is no "it" to which one refers in saying "human being." Perhaps the combination of body and soul is not in fact a unity in the way the mind perceives it to be – perhaps not even one or the other alone is truly as much a unity as it seems. Rather, a human being may be more like a galaxy: a loose association of myriad disparate parts, somehow holding themselves in relative proximity to each other. Or perhaps what is meant by "human being" always includes a soul or mind of which the nature is a matter of serious uncertainty. Is the soul correctly understood as a self? What indeed is the soul? If the nature of the soul does not match the idea of a human being that we hold in our minds, then it would make some sense to say that the "human being" is a fiction. None of these questions or possibilities

[5] See Denyer, 211-212.

can adequately be taken up, however, without some understanding of what it means to *be*, or to be a self, a true part of the whole we perceive as the cosmos. This must be grasped before we can draw conclusions as to whether any given thing – such as the human being – is something or nothing.

By alluding to the key themes of the fuller, more precise discussion that he elides, Socrates both allows us to work out the questions he has on his mind, and gives Alcibiades the impression that they are engaged in a serious philosophic discussion.[6] In fact, it is closer to an indoctrination of Alcibiades in the belief that his soul must become the highest and most serious focus of his life. Of course, this may be a beneficial belief (cf. 120c9-d8), and even a beautiful one, but it has not been demonstrated in the way Alcibiades supposes. In accordance with this indoctrination, the next portion of the exhortation is dedicated to the explicit demotion of all pursuits besides the pursuit of self-knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the soul. First, Socrates runs down the arts: the doctor and the trainer know the body but not themselves, while farming and all craftsmanship are all said to be "vulgar" arts, as they provide knowledge not even of the body, but of what belongs to it (131a2-b9). Alcibiades welcomes this last conclusion especially; he has, after all, been dismissing Socrates' comparisons of him to tradesmen and artisans throughout the conversation in his struggle to clarify what the political art governs and why it should be exalted. But what Socrates suggests next is more difficult for Alcibiades to swallow. He begins to draw conclusions about Alcibiades' lovers: they did not love Alcibiades himself, but his body, and this is why they ceased to pursue him once

[6] Alcibiades is not the only one to be fooled by Socrates in this way. See Denyer, 7-9.

his bloom began to fade (131c5-13). As we noted in considering the dialogue's opening speeches, Alcibiades' sense that he is worthy of the greatest goods, of godlike power and fame, stem in large part from his beauty and from the flattering attention his beauty has garnered him. Socrates now attacks Alcibiades' pride directly at its source: the attention he has received says *nothing* about Alcibiades' worth; it merely refers to something he possesses. It is as if his admirers loved him only for his money (cf. 131b13-c4).

Socrates claims to be the only lover of Alcibiades' soul, and that this is the explanation of his strangeness as a lover, i.e., of why he has remained after Alcibiades' other lovers have left off. The effect of this revelation on Alcibiades is quite clear: he is adamant that Socrates not leave off like the others (131d6). But this means that Socrates now has some real leverage with Alcibiades: whereas he flattered Alcibiades at the outset of the conversation just to gain an audience with him, he is now in a position to demand something in return for his continued attention and guidance. What he asks is that Alcibiades "strive to be most beautiful" – not in his body, of course, but in his soul (131d7). Note that it is the earnest attempt or striving that Socrates demands, not success. His concern, as he goes on to explain, is that Alcibiades will become a lover of the demos (*dēmerastēs*), and thereby become corrupted. He does not say what this corruption entails, except to say that it will make him uglier or baser (*aischrōn*), but apparently "many and great men among the Athenians have suffered this" (131e10-132a4). Whatever is meant by this corruption, it is clear that the most immediate danger to be addressed is that of Alcibiades being seduced by the Athenian public, which, Socrates says, is "fair of face … but one has to look upon it once it has stripped" (132a5-7). We

gather, then, that Alcibiades is prone to believing that there is something splendid in *serving* the Athenians, like a lover who is enraptured by the beauty of his beloved. But Socrates knows that this beauty is a kind of illusion, an adornment of sorts that can be stripped away to reveal the mundanity of political affairs. To avoid corruption, Alcibiades will have to "train first … and learn what needs learning in order to go into the things of the city," so that he may "go with an antidote, and suffer nothing terrible" (132b1-3). It thus becomes clear that Socrates wants to hold Alcibiades back from politics long enough to provide him with a certain preparation against becoming enraptured, so that the dazzling effect of extraordinary political honors can be counteracted by the knowledge or firmly held opinion that these honors are not what they appear to be. However, Socrates makes no attempt to suggest that the political life as such is detrimental; Alcibiades need not suspend his entry into politics indefinitely, bur just long enough to prepare himself against its gravest dangers.

And yet we still do not have a clear idea of what those dangers are, or what the corruption is that Socrates has in mind. There has, however, been one indication of the substance of the teaching Socrates hopes will help protect Alcibiades: Alcibiades has agreed that the self-knowledge he must obtain is moderation (*sōphrosunē*, 131b4-5). Moderation – which was the leading member of Socrates' list of Spartan virtues (122c5) – is the first specific virtue clearly endorsed by Socrates in this final exhortation. We might expect Socrates to elaborate by explaining how such moderation will help Alcibiades in the management of the city's affairs and how it will help protect him against the dangers of corruption. From such an account, we could get a clearer

impression of the corruption Socrates speaks of by considering what measures he is taking to prevent it. But before Socrates takes up such a discussion, there is a remarkable passage in which Socrates purports to explain the meaning of the Delphic inscription, and thus the manner in which one can obtain self-knowledge or moderation.

Socrates' explanation runs as follows. The way for a soul to come to know itself is analogous to the way an eye would come to see itself. Just as the eye must look into a reflective surface, so there must be for the soul an object in contemplating which it will come to know itself. In the case of the eye, the very part in which the virtue of the eye, sc. sight, happens to reside, namely the pupil, also has the properties of a mirror. If one gazes into an eye, one will see one's face reflected, and thus an eye can see itself by looking to another eye in that place where its virtue is found. Likewise, by looking to that part of another's soul where its virtues, sc. wisdom and the like, reside, the soul will come to know itself. Now, this virtue of the soul, by which it knows and thinks or is prudent (*phronein*), is the most divine thing in it. "This in [the soul] is therefore similar to the god, and someone looking to this and knowing everything divine, both god and thought (*phronēsin*), would thus most know himself" (132c9-133c6).

Let us begin by considering the effect of this explanation on Alcibiades. The upshot would seem to be that Alcibiades must spend his time with Socrates if he is to know himself. By contemplating Socrates' wisdom and observing the way he thinks, Alcibiades will come to understand what a soul is, and will thereby become able properly to care for himself. The account is also delivered with a steady crescendo, culminating in the claim that the human soul approaches godliness most by wisdom, knowledge, and

thought. Alcibiades is therefore encouraged to believe that what is divine within him can be nurtured and brought out if he is willing to pay careful attention to what is divine within Socrates. Incidentally, it may be at this moment that Socrates' repeated claims to have access to a divine power or divine wisdom will strike Alcibiades as more serious than he had previously suspected (cf. 124d1). Moreover, the elevation of the soul that has been the theme of this exhortation now takes on a significant new dimension. If there had been any doubt when the soul and the body were differentiated, there can be none now: souls are not physical beings, and therefore neither are we. The very experience of consciousness, of knowing and thinking, announces our connection to a world beyond what is disclosed by the senses, an invisible reality that bafflingly intersects with the visible one, and to powerful beings who seem to order and oversee the whole. In addition to Socrates' exhortation to moral virtue, Alcibiades is now given a jolting inducement to piety.

But there is much more to this passage than its effect on Alcibiades. The *Alcibiades* has been punctuated by reminders that Socrates too is seeking an education in his relationship with Alcibiades. In the first exhortation, there seemed to be a hint that he was seeking self-knowledge (113a4-5). In the second, it became clear that he was concerned with confirming his wisdom, albeit by a means that appeared to become closed to him shortly thereafter (118c7-d8, 119b5-c5). Earlier in this final exhortation, Socrates raised but did not pursue some intriguing questions about the nature of the human being and of the soul (130a5-c7). Now, as the exhortation approaches its conclusion, Socrates lays out a method for a soul to come to know itself through an examination of wisdom

and the divine. The suggestion that this account is meant to describe the method and substance of Socrates' own philosophic project can also help us to solve the puzzle of his introduction to the account. Why does he say that it will be an explanation of the Delphic inscription, "Know thyself"? It would be lunacy to think that this pithy imperative implied anything like the elaborate methodology that Socrates goes on to explain. But the Delphic Oracle is an important figure for the Platonic Socrates: in the *Apology of Socrates*, he claims that his refutations of statesmen, poets, and craftsmen were in motivated by an attempt to test the veracity of the god's pronouncement that no one was wiser than Socrates. Now, if one wishes to place this twenty-year-old Alcibiades in the category of statesmen, one can say that Socrates' refutations of him were in the service of his Delphic mission. But it is more illuminating to note that Alcibiades is the first and most famous member of another group: the beautiful, ambitious, aristocratic Athenian youths for corrupting whom Socrates was tried and executed by the city. The account Socrates gives here, then, may indicate the way in which his association with these youths was also a part of his project to test his own wisdom.

It may be tempting to suspect that this account is merely an elaboration of our earlier suggestion that Socrates wishes to confirm his wisdom by making others wise. But the analogy of the eye seeking its reflection in another eye does not quite bear that interpretation. The reflecting eye is in one way active, and in another way passive. It is active in that it is gazing back into the eye that gazes into it. Socrates will watch Alcibiades watching Socrates. More concretely, Socrates will observe Alcibiades' process of knowing and thinking as Alcibiades attempts to grasp Socrates' wisdom. But

the eye is passive in that it does not become, but merely *reflects*, that which it sees. Socrates will examine Alcibiades' development as it is exposed to a Socratic education in an attempt to see his own wisdom confirmed (or "reflected"). In particular, Socrates seems to be interested to learn or confirm something about the nature of the soul in its relation to the divine. Thus, Socrates' encouragement of piety in Alcibiades comes at exactly the moment when he signals to the careful reader the most important reason for that encouragement. We can therefore make the following tentative suggestion as to the purpose of Socrates' education of Alcibiades in the second half of the dialogue. On the one hand, it is a genuine attempt to direct Alcibiades away from his more dangerous tendencies and to protect him from a form of corruption which has not yet been made entirely clear. On the other hand, it is an education that will allow Socrates closely to observe the human soul in the active pursuit of happiness through wisdom, and as its attachment to virtue and piety grows and changes. It is thus, as Socrates himself says, an attempt to gain self-knowledge by learning about "everything divine, both god and thought."

Socrates has by now convinced Alcibiades that he needs a Socratic education in virtue before he can begin his political career. This is not, as we have said, because the goodness of such a career has come into doubt, but rather because Alcibiades has become convinced that he is destined to fail if he does not take care to become as excellent or virtuous as possible. What remains is for Socrates to explain how that attention to virtue will allow him to succeed where he otherwise would have failed. Socrates will appear to fulfill his promise after all, having something to offer Alcibiades without which his

ambitions would go unfulfilled. But, as Socrates' arguments in this section are relatively weak, Alcibiades' failure to object will testify to the strength of the conviction Socrates has instilled in him that nothing is more important now than care for the virtue of his soul.

Socrates begins by renewing his agreement with Alcibiades that moderation is self-knowledge. Then, for a moment, he comes close to raising a crucial question that has been left unaddressed throughout this final section: "So if we neither know ourselves nor are moderate, would we be able to know our things, and among these, both *bad and good* things?" (133c18-23, my emphasis). By specifying the bad and good things, Socrates reminds us that the most important function of self-knowledge must be the ability to provide oneself with the good and avoid the bad (cf. *Charmides* 174a10 ff.). But Socrates immediately ceases to speak of the bad and the good for oneself, and it becomes clear that he has already prejudiced Alcibiades' determination of them: virtue is the human good or at least its necessary and sufficient condition, and vice stands likewise with respect to the bad. As the dialogue winds toward its conclusion, then, Socrates more and more makes virtue the *sine qua non* of all human happiness. Rescinding his earlier concession to doctors, trainers, farmers, and craftsmen, who were said to be immoderate in lacking self-knowledge but still to have knowledge of the body and its things, Socrates now says that *only* moderation can provide knowledge of oneself, one's things, and the things of one's things. Moderation is also therefore necessary, Alcibiades agrees, if one is going to have knowledge of the things of others or of cities; the immoderate man can never be a statesman or a competent household manager, but, lacking knowledge of what

he does, he will err, do badly, be wretched, and make those wretched on whose behalf he is acting (133d1-134b3).[7] Nothing worthwhile, it would seem, can be accomplished without moderation.

Furthermore, continues Socrates, this means that it is not the wealthy man who avoids the greatest misery, but the moderate man. We thus see a return of Socrates' attempt to weaken Alcibiades' attraction to wealth – though Alcibiades' lukewarm response to this claim may be a troubling sign in that regard. Socrates extends this conclusion to the city: building walls, triremes, and dockyards will not make the city happy if it lacks virtue. This seems to supply the knowledge of which the last refutation showed Alcibiades to be ignorant. The purpose of political rule is to provide virtue to the citizens, and this is why a good statesman must be virtuous (134b4-c7). With this exhortation to virtue now explicitly connected to the end or purpose of political rule, Socrates at last begins to make explicit the danger his teaching and preparation are meant to curb in Alcibiades: "Therefore it is not authority or power (*archēn*) to do what you want that must be provided either to you or to the city, but justice and moderation … and it is by acting justly and moderately that both you and the city will act in a manner dear to the god (*theophilōs*)" (134c9-d2). The power to do what he wished is what Alcibiades admires in Pericles, according to Socrates' opening speech, and what Alcibiades covets for himself (104b3-8, cf. 105a7-b7). One could well call such power omnipotence. It is

[7] According to the discussion of knowledge and error in the dialogue's central exhortation, this would mean that the moderate man not only has self-knowledge, but more importantly, knowledge of what he does not know, i.e., that he does not know it. In general, the considerations about self-knowledge and moderation given rather summarily by Socrates here are treated thoroughly in the *Charmides*.

Alcibiades' desire for this power, his belief that he can become omnipotent by ascending to the highest political rule, that is here Socrates' concern, and it is in his expression of that concern that he reintroduces justice as a key political virtue without which no statesman can succeed, linking this virtue to piety. So concerned is Socrates that Alcibiades come to see this as necessary, that he *guarantees* his happiness and that of the city if he and it act uprightly and do well, "looking toward what is divine and bright" (134d3-e2). If such a guarantee is seriously intended, it quietly casts doubt on the possibility of acquiring the virtue Socrates speaks of.

We can now see that the intoxication and corruption of which Socrates spoke, that against which he wants to prepare Alcibiades, is what we surmised in his longest speech was represented by Alcibiades' attraction to Persian luxury. This suggestion accords with Socrates' opposition of virtue to the pursuit of wealth here in the exhortation's culmination. We can also say that the desire Socrates wants to curb in Alcibiades is the same one he was willing to inflate in his opening speeches. Thus, in his final formulation of the "godless and dark" behavior that Alcibiades must avoid, Socrates calls the object of this desire by its name: tyranny. He now makes explicit that the two directions between which Alcibiades must choose are virtue and tyranny (134e4-135b5). It is therefore a tyrannical urge that is fostered by the "love of the demos" to which Socrates earlier referred. The power and honor granted to the statesman by the city only make more insatiable his desire for more power and greater honor. This insatiable desire is what Socrates described in his opening speeches in saying that Alcibiades would never be satisfied if he could not "fill all human beings" with his name and his power. The

antidote Alcibiades must have in hand in going to lead the city, then, is a powerful belief in the goodness of virtue and the impossibility of happiness without it, and in the calamity that will befall him if he should pursue his tyrannical urges – and that means, to some extent, a sober awareness of the illusory hopes and desires that are fostered by the acquisition of great power and honor from the demos (134e8-135b1).

Concluding the exhortation, Socrates now makes explicit Alcibiades' need to submit to him as a teacher. It is better, nobler, and more fitting, agrees Alcibiades, for the bad and slavish, until they acquire virtue, to be ruled by their virtuous superiors. Alcibiades admits with overwhelming shame that he is in a state befitting a slave (135b7-c11). Our suspicion regarding the dialogue's central exhortation is confirmed: Socrates does not need to prove that he is the *only* one able to educate Alcibiades in order for Alcibiades to agree to turn to him for education. Needless to say, Socrates does not here repeat the test that forced him to abort the project of the dialogue's first half. He does not for a moment allow Alcibiades to suspect that Socratic education in virtue is unimportant for political success. The dialogue does, however, conclude with what appears to be another failed test. Socrates asks Alcibiades if he knows how he will escape his condition, and Alcibiades answers, "If you wish it, Socrates." Socrates says this answer is not "beautifully spoken," and corrects it: "If the god wishes it" (135c12-d5). Alcibiades' response would have been better had it reflected an appreciation of the training and discipline to which Socrates had often pointed, or of the piety Socrates had been attempting to foster in him, or of the need for moderation as self-knowledge that was the theme of the final exhortation. Instead, he seems to attribute to Socrates a

wondrous power to bestow upon him the great goods he desires. We might suspect that, just as Alcibiades' ambition was not redirected toward a philosophic curiosity in the first half of the dialogue, it may not have been sufficiently redirected toward virtue and piety here in the second. Socrates' foisting of the responsibility for Alcibiades' success on to the god is partly a prudential measure: he does not want to bear the brunt of the blame when his education turns out not to fulfill Alcibiades' ambitions. But it also indicates the emergence of a remarkable dynamic: Alcibiades now looks to Socrates as to a god.

Hence, Alcibiades feels he must now win Socrates' favor. He happily accepts Socrates' emendation, and warns him that they will likely be changing roles: it will be Alcibiades attending to Socrates from now on (135d7-10). Socrates responds strangely: "O well-born one, my love will not differ from a stork's if, having hatched a winged love in you, it will be tended by it in turn" (135e1-3). Perhaps this is an indication of what Socrates sees as the best case for Alcibiades now. His own love for Alcibiades – or whatever that represented – has not borne the fruit he hoped it would. Alcibiades will not be a philosopher. But Alcibiades' newfound affection for Socrates means that Socrates can hope at least to have the benefit of his loyalty and service. Indeed, should Alcibiades become powerful in the city, this loyalty would be of no small benefit. Moreover, Alcibiades' agreement to devote himself to Socrates, and his commitment to "begin from this moment to take care of justice," mean that the Delphic quest for self-knowledge through the examination of Alcibiades' soul can continue (135e4-5). And yet, Socrates' concluding reply reveals some serious concern: "I wish that you would continue to do so; but I dread – not from distrusting something in your nature, but from seeing the might of

the city – that it will overpower both me and you" (135e6-8). Socrates is not confident that Alcibiades will be able to continue to concern himself with justice; the might of the city, which would seem to refer to the seductive power of the demos, will be too much for Alcibiades to resist. The nascent flame of tyrannical desire in him will be fanned. The account of Thucydides and others would seem to support the suggestion that Alcibiades' downfall was a result of the combination of his love for the demos on the one hand, and his immoderate, tyrannical streak on the other. But will Socrates' continued attempt to educate him have *no* effect? Or rather, what *will* be the effect of the continued relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades – will it succeed in restraining Alcibiades somewhat, or might it in some respects make matters worse? It is with these questions in mind that we must turn to the *Second Alcibiades*.

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